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A CONFIDENTIAL AGENT BY JAMES PAYN.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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A
CONFIDENTIAL AGENT

BY

JAMES PAYN,

AUTHOR OF

"FOUND DEAD," "BY PROXY," "UNDER ONE ROOF," ETC.

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CONTENTS

OF VOLUME II.

	Page
CHAPTER I. A Superfluous Precaution	7
— II. A Traitor in the Camp	18
— III. Writing for the Press	31
— IV. An Interview with the Ladies	40
— V. Uncle Stephen's View	53
— VI. Mr. Signet has a bad Quarter of an Hour	66
— VII. Trouble in the Mews	77
— VIII. Another Deserter	89
— IX. The Posthumous Letter	98
— X. Two Views	105
— XI. Two Landladies	113
— XII. Deserters	127
— XIII. Her Ladyship and Sabey	135
— XIV. "I cannot write it, Amy"	144
— XV. The Placard	151
— XVI. Parted	159
— XVII. Another Parting	170
— XVIII. Mr. Barlow takes Action	182
— XIX. The Lawyer and the Major	191
— XX. Making Inquiries	203

	Page
CHAPTER XXI. With Phœbe Mayson	213
— XXII. The Victim	225
— XXIII. A New Arrival	234
— XXIV. Found	244
— XXV. The Key to the Enigma	254
— XXVI. Gathered Threads	266
— XXVII. Conclusion	275

A CONFIDENTIAL AGENT.

CHAPTER I.

A SUPERFLUOUS PRECAUTION.

APART from the portrait of his missing assistant, and the furtherance (as he imagined) of his suit with Amy, it was not very much that Mr. Signet had obtained from his visit to Cavendish Grove; but it was something. It was important to him, as we have said, to show that he for his part entertained the highest confidence in Matthew Helston and continued to do so; that he and Matthew's belongings were as good friends as ever, notwithstanding what had occurred; and it still more behoved him to strengthen and to keep steadfast all testimony that told for Matthew. At present this was confined to that of John Rutherford the cabman; not a very weighty witness, it may be thought, against the direct evidence of Lady Pargiter and her servants, but still (as Mr. Brail had reported) "dependable." Moreover, supposing he had not been bribed by Matthew—an idea that was rigidly excluded from

Mr. Signet's present calculations—what motive could he have had for falsehood? Mr. Signet had been told by Mr. Brail that "if he meant to make a fight for it"—that is, to decline to pay Lady Pargiter for the loss of the diamonds—he had better not visit Hybla Mews in person.

"They will say," urged the detective, "that you got at the man, and paid him to stick to his story—which is already, I must confess, to my thinking very much in the cock-and-bull line."

But inclined as the jeweller was to follow the police agent's advice in the main, and to attach much weight to his opinions (when they did not tend to despair of his own chances), he found this prohibition too hard to be obeyed. Like a child who has a dormouse he is forbidden to stroke, Mr. Signet hankered after his only witness, and could not understand how he could be damaged by a little handling. He had not the least intention of cramming him for cross-examination, or of suggesting to him any fact that might not have come to his own knowledge; but he wanted to see what manner of man he was, and to hear with his own ears the details of that strange story on the maintenance or breaking down of which so much depended. The largeness of his stake in the matter was of course the main reason of his acceptance of the cabman's theory; but his dislike of Lady Pargiter—which by this time, indeed, had grown to positive hatred—undoubtedly made it more grateful to him.

On leaving Cavendish Grove his usual course would have been citywards; but he bade his driver

put him down at Hybla Terrace, at the corner of which he dismissed him. He did not wish the man to know that he was about to visit the Mews.

As he neared the "Rising Sun" he came upon an unkempt shambling creature, certainly attached to the public-house in one sense, and probably so in another, of whom he inquired John Rutherford's number; but the man professed ignorance, and referred him to the inn.

Under any other circumstances—even in his improved ones of late days—Mr. Richard Dartmoor would certainly have been met with slouching under the portico, or speculating with his hands in his pockets upon the solid content of the edifice from without; but he had disappeared within the last ten hours, almost as suddenly as poor Matthew Helston. The cause of this was remarkable. Mr. Dartmoor had been slouching and speculating as usual on the preceding afternoon, when, on emerging from the inn after a refreshing "dram," he had suddenly come upon the very person whom Mr. Signet had just met. This dissolute loungeur and loafer was so exceedingly like himself that the effect was almost the same upon him as that of the Doppelgänger upon a German, or that species of second sight called "the double" upon a Scotchman. Imagine a person of nervous temperament (much aggravated by liquor), who, intending a practical joke, dresses himself up as a spectre; and instead of his victim meets in a lonely place a real ghost—and you will have some sort of idea of the state of mind into which Mr. Richard Dartmoor was thrown by this *rencontre*.

He toddled back to the inn for a tonic dram, and then slouched out by the swing-door on the other side, not certain of his future movements, *i. e.* whether he would not shift his quarters, and leave the "Rising Sun" for good and all, rather than face such visions; when what should he see within a few yards of him but another counterfeit presentment of himself. "*Voilà deux*—there are two!" he would have exclaimed, like the Black Mousquetaire of Thomas Ingoldsby, had he been familiar with the quotation; as it was, he murmured—"Blue-bottles, by gum!" Then he looked up to the sky with a careless air, as though snowflakes were thistledown, and south-easters zephyrs; and not gradually, like the youth who "journeys farther from the East," but at a much more rapid rate, increased his distance from the "Rising Sun."

Unconscious of the loss which Society in the neighbourhood of Hybla Terrace had thus received, Mr. Signet entered the Mews, and was directed to Mr. Rutherford's dwelling. He had a certain right to intrude upon the cabman's privacy, inasmuch as the latter was well aware that he had defrayed—through Matthew Helston—the very considerable sums that had gone into "honest John's" pocket in payment of those nightly expeditions to Moor Street, the last of which had ended so disastrously.

The door was opened to him by Sally, who always performed that office.

"I am Mr. Signet," he said frankly; "you will know what I am come about."

"I know very well," she said. "You have sent

the police after my poor husband, but he is not a bit frightened. He is as honest a man as you are, and he has told no lies."

"I hope not," said Mr. Signet, in a very genuine manner. "'Tell the truth and stick to it' should be every Englishman's motto. If you will allow me, I will walk upstairs."

Perhaps he had read in "Hints on Etiquette" that in getting over stiles and going upstairs one should precede a lady, or perhaps he wished to see Mr. Rutherford before his wife should announce his presence; but at all events Mr. Signet did precede her.

He found the cabman still in his sleeved waistcoat, as Mr. Brail had found him. He had been too much disturbed in his mind to complete his toilette, far less to take out his cab as usual, and he was smoking his sixteenth pipe.

"Oh, here's another, is there?" he growled.

"It's Mr. Signet, John," put in Sally hastily.

"What do I care who it is?"

"Of course you don't," said the jeweller; "an honest man should have no apprehensions."

"Apprehensions be hanged!" exclaimed Mr. Rutherford. "Of course I shall be apprehended. Poor folks always are when rich folks have mislaid things or made away with them. I knew a man as was transported for life for stealing a watch that was all the time in an old lady's watch-pocket over her bed, and who was so fortunate after a year or two as to get the Queen's pardon for it; but it isn't everybody as has his good luck."

"That was a sad mistake indeed," said the jeweller sympathisingly. "But it cannot have occurred in this case. Would you be so good as to tell me what you know about this Moor Street business—the same story, I mean, that you told the person who called on you this morning? Have you got such a thing as pen and ink, Mrs. Rutherford?"

A bright thought here struck the jeweller. He would set the man's narrative down in writing, and get him to sign it. If it was of no other use, it would be always handy to refresh Mr. Rutherford's memory.

Sally produced a washing-book, the stump of a pen, and an ink-bottle—the contents of which were so dried up that it had to be liquefied like the blood of St. Januarius. Mr. Signet, however, was deft with his fingers, and could write with anything. John narrated the story with which we are acquainted, more doggedly than before, but almost in the same words. "If you was to squeeze me between the keb doors of my own 'ansom," he said, "you would always have the same story."

Mr. Signet looked at him as though he had been an Early Martyr prepared to suffer for the faith—and perhaps even with a greater admiration.

"Now be so kind, my excellent fellow, as to set your name to this, which I have written down from your own lips."

"No, I couldn't do that," said honest John; "I really couldn't."

"Not sign it? Then do you mean to say it's not true, you scoundrel?"

Mr. Signet would probably have proceeded to use much stronger language had not Mrs. Rutherford whispered something in his ear.

"Oh, can't write, can't he? He can make his mark, I suppose?"

"If you call me a scoundrel again I'll make a pretty big mark between your eyes," exclaimed John irascibly.

"He's honesty itself," murmured Mr. Signet, in a rapture at this menace. "He'd be worth his weight in—well, in seed pearls—before the Lord Chief Justice. Stop one moment—we must have a witness, and it mustn't be his wife." Mr. Signet stepped to the "verander," and put his head out. Immediately opposite, smoking a straw and speculating after the manner of his kind, was the man to whom he had applied in vain for Mr. Rutherford's address.

"Hi, come here!" he cried authoritatively. The man slouched carelessly across the yard, though the wind was keen enough to have quickened the steps of a sloth.

"Can you write?" inquired the jeweller.

"Ay," replied the other, so gloomily that one might have thought the knowledge of that art—upon the principle of a little learning being a dangerous thing—had brought him into his present unprosperous condition.

"Then come up here."

Not without some pride in the device which his own legal acumen had suggested, Mr. Signet pointed out the spot in the washing-book where the cabman

was to put his cross, and the witness to subscribe his name. The materials he had to work with were crude enough, but every formality was complied with. Mr. Rutherford evinced a decided gratification in repeating the words, "Witness my act and deed" after the jeweller; and when the latter murmured, with a sigh of satisfaction, *Litera scripta manet*, honest John nodded approvingly, as though that mystic sentence had been the one thing necessary to accomplish the rite.

"Money," said Mr. Signet, addressing the stranger, who stood with his eyes glancing furtively about him and with his hand passing slowly over his mouth, as though in fond imagination removing the traces of liquor, "I am unable to give you for this service; but I dare say a dram of something short would be acceptable this cold morning. Mrs. Rutherford, can you oblige me so far?"

Sally at once produced a bottle of gin, and Mr. John Jones, messenger, of Rose Court, Oxford Street—for such, it appeared from his signature, was his style and title—having accepted her hospitality, ducked his shock of hair and shambled out.

"What I have said to yonder fellow, I must say to you, John," continued the jeweller: "what you have done this morning must go without any immediate fee or reward. No man, says the law, must be paid for telling the truth."

"I quite understand that, sir," answered Mr. Rutherford naively, "for then everybody would tell the truth, and where would the lawyers be?"

"But henceforth remember, Star and Signet are

your friends, my man. They will see you through this business, and when that's done will show their gratitude."

"What I should like better than money—though money's allus acceptable to a poor man, Mr. Signet—is to see that 'ere Lady Pargiter trounced. It's her as has been the cause of all this from first to last; and it's her as has got Master Matthew and them diamonds—I'll lay my life on it."

"Give me your hand, John," said Mr. Signet effusively;—"I wish I could put something in it, but I dare not. An honest man's the noblest work of Providence.—Lest your memory should ever want refreshing, by-the-by, concerning this matter, I'll have a copy made of this little document, and your wife will read it out to you—you *can* read, my good woman, can't you?"

"Read!" exclaimed John with indignation. "Just you wait and hear her! Sally, give him that account of the Tetbury Pet's performance in last week's *Hera*."

"Not just now; another day," said Mr. Signet hastily. "God bless you both! We shall always know where to find you when you're wanted, shan't we, John? Good-bye!"

"Wanted!" growled Mr. Rutherford, as the jeweller tripped downstairs. "Oh, that's what it comes to after all, is it? You're hand and glove with the *Perlece*, are yer?"

Ignorant of the offence he had thus given, Mr. Signet hurried to Paulet Street, where he found Mr. Brail awaiting him.

"You have news?" said that gentleman, perceiving a look of triumph in his employer's face.

"Not exactly news, but I think I have done a good stroke of work this morning. I've got Rutherford's evidence in black and white, and here it is."

"And in your handwriting too," observed Mr. Brail drily. "That will be of interest to your friends, no doubt, sir; but it will not increase the value of the document in the eyes of a jury."

"Well, the man couldn't write, you see," said Mr. Signet, a good deal taken aback by this remark; "and then, I took care to get a witness."

"So I see; John Jones, messenger, Rose Court, Oxford Street—um! Well, I don't know the gentleman by name, but I seem to know his handwriting. Where did you pick him up?"

"In Hybla Mews; a perfect stranger, and therefore an independent witness, I conclude."

"Not so very independent, Mr. Signet. He's one of the two watchers as I set myself to look after the cabman."

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Signet.

"Well, I did tell you, leave everything in my hands, sir," continued Mr. Brail severely; "when you employ a Detective, it's better to do that than to meddle with a matter yourself. Amateurs is more harm than good, you may rely on't.—Now listen to me, for I've got a *fact* for you—a fact worth twenty washing-books full of noughts and crosses. A young woman has just been here with a *communication*."

"A young woman! You mean Miss Thurlow, I suppose!"

"No, I don't; she was quite another sort of young woman—one as knows what's what, I guess, and the price of it. I only caught a glimpse of her through the shop-door, just now, but I'd seen her once before to-day—as I passed through the hall in Moor Street. She was muffled up, and wore a thick veil, when she asked your shopman if Mr. Signet was in; but I don't forget faces in a hurry. So I just stepped out—as a friend of the firm—to ask her business. She's Lady Pargiter's maid."

"And what *was* her business?"

"You're to hear that to-morrow. But I found out this much, that she hates her mistress like the devil, and has got a grudge against her, with the means of paying her out. She gave me to understand she only dealt with principals—which means a lot of money."

"What does that matter?" exclaimed Mr. Signet impatiently. "Do you think she knows anything?"

"Ay, I do. I'm inclined to think you're right after all. It's Lady Pargiter as is at the bottom of this business, and her maid knows it."

"I said so! I was sure of it!" exclaimed Mr. Signet excitedly. "But why did you let her go away?"

Because she said she had no time to spare, and her absence would excite suspicion. To-morrow's her Sunday out. She's got the key of the whole mystery, and—you mark my words—she will come here to sell it."

CHAPTER II.

A TRAITRESS IN THE CAMP.

WE know that Mr. Signet was, in intention at least, even at his comparatively advanced period of life, a man of gallantry, but it is probable that even in the hey-day of his youthful prime he had never looked forward with such excitement to the arrival of a fair visitor as he did on that Sunday morning to the coming of Miss Patty Selwood. It was not the evanescent passion for a pretty face, for he had never seen the young woman; whether she was short or tall, dark or fair, was no matter to him whatever. Mr. Brail had told him she was young, and he preferred her so to be, as it was probable he might make a better bargain with her; but otherwise, for all he cared, she might have been of the age in which Sir Cornewall Lewis refused to believe—a hundred—provided she retained her memory. That was the one thing important to him. She was coming, he felt, to tell him what she knew about Lady Pargiter and her diamonds.

She was to leave Moor Street at half-past ten, partly because by that time she would have made her ladyship presentable to the public, and partly because it was the hour for Public Worship, and by a polite fiction, common to establishments of all degrees, the waiting-maid was supposed to be going to church. Not, of course, that "my lady's maid" was to be seen on a Sunday morning with a prayer-book

folded inside her pocket-handkerchief like any Mary Anne or Eliza Jane in ordinary domestic service. If she did have a prayer-book (which is doubtful), it was carried without ostentation; and so neat and well chosen was her apparel, that unless you had seen her come out of the area gate of No. 10, you would never have believed her to be a servant at all. That is to say, a man would not have done so; but I believe (such is the marvellous discernment of the sex in such matters) that his wife would have detected it at a glance. *She* would have known that the silk dress was a cheap silk, and the pretty collar of lace only a few pence a yard. It was not Miss Selwood's custom, indeed, to wear either cheap silks or inferior collars on her "Sundays out," for on such occasions she was wont to lay Lady Pargiter's wardrobe under contribution; but on this particular day she wore her own clothes. The reason of this was that she had a fixed intention of breaking with her mistress, and to a delicate mind there were therefore obvious reasons why she should cease to put herself under obligations to her; it may also be added that, having determined to dig up the hatchet, she was exceedingly cautious not to give her ladyship an opportunity of doing her an ill turn. It was indeed in the highest degree unlikely that Lady Pargiter would miss any particular garments out of her very extensive collection, or even recognise them on Miss Selwood's back; but that young lady was so prudent that, rather than run the risk, she had sacrificed even her personal vanity.

In a ball-dress, with the Pargiter diamonds on

her, Miss Selwood would have made a great sensation; and even without them, and as she was, in her modest "wraps"—for the wind had risen again, and was scattering a few flakes of snow—she was an attractive young person, such as foolish young men will turn round to look at for the second time, and thereby bring themselves, deservedly, against lamp-posts and pillar-letter-boxes. As if to preserve her fellow creatures from such mischances, however, Miss Selwood dropped her veil as soon as she got clear of Moor Street, and entered an omnibus bound for the City.

The establishment in Paulet Street, of course, was closed, but she felt no hesitation in ringing at the private bell. She had naturally no *mauvaise honte*, and, had it been otherwise, the motives that were actuating her were too powerful and pressing to admit of irresolution. She had always despised and disliked her mistress, though she had "put up with her" hitherto for the sake of wages and perquisites; but the insulting words used by Lady Pargiter on the previous day had sunk deep and rankled; and, eager for revenge, the opportunity of wreaking it, not only with impunity, but, as she anticipated, to her own great advantage, had now arrived to her.

The door was opened by Mr. Brail himself, which she justly considered to be a good sign. It was evident that even the fact of her visit was considered too important to be entrusted to servants. At the same time, she was fully resolved not to be fobbed off with Mr. Brail, who had already endeavoured, in

vain, to persuade her to confide her business to his ear.

Mr. Signet is within, I reckon," said she, coming to a halt in the passage. "What I have to say must be said to him, and him only. You understand that?"

"Of course I do," said Mr. Brail, with tender politeness. "You mean to deal with principals only, and quite right—only principals must be protected." He wagged his head and pursed his lips, and pointed over his left shoulder to the "parlour" door.

"I don't know what you mean," said Miss Selwood bluntly. She had as many airs and graces at her command as most of her sex—indeed, in this respect, she was considerably above the average; but she knew better than to waste them—upon a policeman.

"Well, the fact is, my dear," continued Mr. Brail, no whit discomposed by his fair companion's brusqueness, "you are one of those few young women who think too lightly of their personal attractions; and to tell the honest truth, Mr. Signet's afraid of you. You wouldn't hurt him, of course—not you; you wouldn't hurt anybody, if you could help it."

"Yes, I would," said Miss Patty vindictively.

"Ay, but that's because they deserve it," suggested the detective; "because they have been doing or saying cruel things?"

"Never you mind about that," observed Miss Selwood, with a sudden recollection that she was showing her hand, and to a very clever player. "You haven't told me what Mr. Signet's afraid of me about,"

"Why, because he's a bachelor, and because you are so monstrous good-looking. Queer reasons, you will say, for his refusal to see you alone" ["Get away with you!" said Patty scornfully]; "but so it is. The fact is"—here he sank his voice to a whisper—"the old gent is engaged to be married, and the party as is a-going to have him is that jealous that his eyes wouldn't be safe in his head if she ever come to know as he was shut up with you alone on this Sunday morning. And I don't blame her," added Mr. Brail, with a frankness which we fear can hardly be set down in mitigation of his previous "tarradiddles."

"Do you mean to say that his young woman is to be present while I speak to him?" inquired Miss Selwood, with indignation.

"Not a bit of it; no, he wouldn't stand *that*. 'But if she's so desperate lovely, Mr. Brail, as you describe,' says she (for I was fool enough to let out about it), 'mother must be there—that I insist upon.' Then I said, 'I'll be your mother, miss;' and so we contrived to get over her, for I knew you wouldn't object to *me*, my dear," added Mr. Brail with confidence.

"Well, I do object; though if it must be, it must be. But you won't find two heads better than one in getting the advantage of me, if that's what you're after." As that and nothing else was most distinctly what he had been "after" in making the arrangement in question, it was creditable in Mr. Brail that he only expressed unstinted approbation at the shrewdness which had thus unmasked him.

"Well, that's a good un, Miss Selwood, that is—if you never say another. When a girl is so smart as you, it makes one wish as one wasn't an old man—or leastways, what is more to the purpose, wasn't tacked to an old woman—which is my case. Just walk this way, and mind the step. Mr. Signet,"—this he said as he ushered her into what had been poor Matthew's room—"here's Miss Selwood from Moor Street, as I told you of."

"I am delighted to see you, miss," said Mr. Signet. "Pray sit down."

Mr. Brail behind them shook his head sedately. "He don't understand gals, *he* don't," was the reflection passing through his brain.

"You have come, as I understand," continued the jeweller, with an air half conciliatory, half patronising, "to give us some information respecting these missing diamonds?"

"I am not aware as I ever said so," observed Miss Selwood coldly. "Some people, however, are so clever that they know a party's business better than the party do herself."

"The young lady is alluding to me," observed Mr. Brail playfully. "I only understood, sir, that she had got something to say respecting Lady Pargiter's share in this mysterious matter."

"Right you are," observed Miss Patty, nodding her head approvingly; "that's the woman you have to squeeze for information. You must squeeze her pretty tight to get it."

"I shouldn't think she was a very soft one," hazarded Mr. Brail.

"Soft! She hasn't got a soft spot about her—except, may be, her 'ed," exclaimed Patty contemptuously. "It was precious green of her to let me see——"

"You were about to say something illustrative of Lady Pargiter's want of caution," observed the jeweller sweetly; for Patty had stopped herself with a scared look, much as a horseman pulls up suddenly at the edge of a chalk-pit and cranes over it. She had evidently been on the verge of letting out some secret.

"Was I? I forgot," said Patty cunningly. "My mistress wants a good many things as is of more account than caution—a heart, for one thing."

"Then you needn't be afraid of hurting her feelings," suggested Mr. Brail. "That's one comfort."

"Quite the contrary," returned Miss Selwood implacably. "If I knew how to hurt her feelings I would; as it is, I can only hurt her pocket—rich as she is, she'll feel *that*."

"You're a good judge of human nature, Miss Selwood," observed the jeweller.

"I don't know about that," she replied tartly; not that she was annoyed with her present company, but embittered by the thoughts within her. "I am a human creature, however, like anybody else; though if you knew how some folks have treated me, you wouldn't think it."

"She doesn't treat other people particularly well," remarked Mr. Signet, calling to mind her ladyship's behaviour in that very room when they differed about the value of the *parure*.

"But this young lady's case is a particularly hard one," observed Mr. Brail; "exposed as she must be to her ladyship's ill-humour day and night, and always having to be civil and respectful."

"Yes, that's it," assented Miss Selwood eagerly; "I've sometimes felt inclined to cut my tongue out for saying such smooth things to her, when all the time I've been longing to wring her neck. If you could hear what she says of *you* sometimes, Mr. Signet, and especially just lately, you'd feel something of what I feel. I don't remember, indeed, as she ever called you a swine."

"Well, I hope not, my dear madam," interposed Mr. Signet.

"But 'cheat' and 'thief' are everyday terms with her."

"Lady Pargiter calls me a cheat and a thief, does she?" inquired the jeweller grimly.

"Oh, all that, and a lot more. You were a cheat ever since you wouldn't give her something she wanted—I don't know what it was—but she called here about it——"

"I remember," said Mr. Signet.

"It was when you wouldn't give her her price for these very diamonds," observed Mr. Brail. When a witness was discursive he never cut him short in full flow, but would dexterously direct him into the desired channel.

"Ah, that explains it!" continued the waiting-maid. "She's always been hankering after turning 'em into money. Long ago she told me it would be a good job if the diamonds were lost or stolen,

since you would then have to pay more for them than you would ever give if you bought them outright."

Mr. Signet glanced at Mr. Brail, but that gentleman's gaze was fixed upon the cuckoo-clock with a look of such innocence and placidity that one would have thought it reminded him of spring time and his boyhood's years.

"And I remember," continued Patty, "that we agreed what a pity it was she couldn't have her cake and eat it too; that is, that she couldn't keep the jewels and yet receive the money for them."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Signet. It was but a monosyllable, but it spoke volumes. Again he looked towards Mr. Brail, and this time with positive resentment. It was monstrous that he should not be keeping his ears open while such revelations were being made. If you have ever been frightened out of your wits by a ghost, with an unbelieving bed-fellow beside you who wouldn't wake and was sure to call you a fool in the morning, you can appreciate Mr. Signet's feelings at his companion's apparent unconcern.

"Then that's the very thing she planned!" exclaimed he with vehemence. "Lady Pargiter has got the diamonds, and yet wants to make me pay for them."

"I never said that," observed Miss Selwood promptly.

"Of course not," interposed Mr. Brail, taking out his handkerchief and delicately dusting the cuckoo, as that glittering bird was affirming it to be exactly

noon; "that is only Mr. Signet's own opinion: this is a free country, and he has a right to express it—in confidence. There are circumstances, moreover, that tend to corroborate this view. You know a Mr. Harvey, I believe?"

"Well, what then? Of course I know him. He is Lady Pargiter's head footman."

"And as fine a young fellow as ever I saw," observed Mr. Brail. "A man too, I should say, who would tell the truth; and yet he made a statement to me which—if the word of a certain lady of title is to be believed—is a falsehood. He said that he himself had been sent after Mr. Matthew Helston's cab on that snowy Friday morning, which she denies."

"I know it. She was a fool to tell such a lie; but she has done more foolish things—and worse—than that."

"And you are come to tell us about them," said Mr. Brail—"for a consideration?"

"Well—yes—or, since you put it so plainly, for two considerations. I want Lady Pargiter prosecuted—punished—*punished*—that above all things; do you understand?"

"We'll do that with the greatest pleasure," said Mr. Signet, with an alacrity that almost equalled the other's vehemence.

"Supposing we get the ground to go upon," observed Mr. Brail cautiously.

"And of course I shall want some money down," added Miss Selwood.

"For value received?" remarked the Detective

drily. "Why, that seems fair enough.—Now, what have you got to tell us?"

"That's very fine," returned the young lady; "but supposing I did tell you, and you were to turn round and say, perhaps, 'Thank you'—or not even that—who would be the fool then?"

"But supposing we gave you the money first, my dear—say ten pounds—or even twenty pounds" (for Patty had glanced at him with great contempt), "and you told us something that we knew already, or which was of no practical service to us, don't you think that would be rather hard on *us*?"

"You're big enough and strong enough—you two—to take it back again," urged Miss Selwood: "whereas, if I once part with my secret—that is, the whole of it—I could never get it back from you: I should be done for."

"I have said she was smart, but smart's no word for her," said Mr. Brail to the cuckoo. "Why, the Attorney-General couldn't have stated a case neater."

"The twenty pounds shall be paid you," chimed in Mr. Signet.

"I must have a hundred," said Miss Selwood. It was plain that the jeweller would have consented to this, had not the Detective interposed.

"Look here, my dear," he said; "I can't allow my employer to throw away his money by the pailful because it is your sweet pretty face as asks him to do it; when we get to three figures we mean business, into which the gentler feelings cannot be permitted to enter. It seems to me that it would

be fair to both parties that they should sign some sort of contract."

"The amount to be paid to be contingent on the value of the information received," added Mr. Signet, as his contribution to this proposal.

"You are talking gibberish," said Miss Selwood bluntly. "As to signing, I'll put my name to nothing, lest Lady Pargiter should come to know of it. You don't know what that woman is, or what she might do in her tantrums. Pay me down a hundred pounds, and I'll tell you something."

"Something that will put us in the way of finding the diamonds?" said Mr. Brail.

"I don't promise you that; but it will be something that will prevent you from having to pay for them."

"That is sufficient," said Mr. Signet; he opened a desk and took from it twenty crisp new five-pound notes, and placed them in the girl's hand.

"I don't like the look of 'em," observed Patty dubiously. "I never saw no fippund notes so clean as this."

"It's all right," said Mr. Brail. "We don't make 'em here, I do assure you.—Now, what's your tip?"

"Well, what I have got to tell you about them diamonds is this—though if you had been half sharp you might have guessed it yourself—do you suppose Lady Pargiter is the kind of woman to let grass grow under her feet, and not have sent to you for her money the very next morning after the jewels disappeared, unless there was a very strong reason

against it? The reason is as she has not got Helston's receipt for 'em."

* The jeweller looked inquiringly at the detective, and this time Mr. Brail returned his glance.

"The young woman's right enough so far, you may depend on't," he replied. "And we ought to have guessed it."

"But where is Mr. Helston—and the diamonds?" exclaimed the jeweller.

"I don't know; leastways, if I did, that wouldn't affect the value of what I have told you. Now, if my lady writes to you for the money—which she won't dare to do, however—you have only to say she has no claim upon you. I should like to see her face when she gets that answer.—Good morning, gentlemen."

Without hurry, yet with a swift and confident step, the young lady left the room, and passed into the street. Mr. Signet would have barred the way, but Mr. Brail prevented him. "Let her go," he said; "don't set her against us. It's good to have a friend in the enemy's camp."

"But she knows all about the diamonds and Helston's disappearance; did you not hear her say, 'leastways, if I did know'?"

"Yes; but that was an afterthought of her own to increase her value in our eyes. She said plump enough 'I don't know' to begin with. She has good reasons for knowing that there is no receipt, but I don't think she knows much more. What she has told—added to Rutherford's testimony—is worth a great deal to us. Though she couldn't have brought

her pig to a better market, she might have sold it at a higher price."

Curiously enough, Miss Patty Selwood's thoughts as she took her way westward were running on the same subject which Mr. Brail had taken for his metaphor.

"A swine is a pig," she was saying to herself: "nobody ever had to pay so much for a pig—or the use of a pig's name—as you will have to pay, my lady."

CHAPTER III.

WRITING FOR THE PRESS.

THE cool head is the great winner in the game of life. To it fall all the prizes of the material sort: money; good position in the law and commerce; and generally what reputation, of the respectable kind, can confer. In rare instances, it even attains the highest honours. These make up to its possessor for a lack of enjoyments which by the nature of the case are denied to him. For Love, for Friendship, for almost all kinds of social pleasure, a man must be more or less impulsive: if he begins to calculate about them, they are lost to him. The Poet has delights which the Financier, though he has made millions, can never share. I am not, of course, speaking of the "philosophic mind," which, to say truth, very few of us, whether poets or otherwise, ever attain to, but of the order of man whom his

friends term philosophic; the world in general a "cool head;" and his enemies a "cool hand." He is almost always prosperous. If he be not, he is of all men the most miserable; for to Prosperity he has pinned himself, and what would be his position with the pin through him and nothing to stick it to!

Mr. Signet was pre-eminently a man of this class, but not altogether by nature. He had had impulses in his time (he had some even now, as we know), but the circumstances of his life and trade had sobered him. He knew how to wait. Men say of a wealthy man that he can "afford" to wait—to hold on to dropping stock till it rises, or to depreciated goods till they are in demand again; but in nine cases out of ten what has helped him to become rich, has been a natural aptitude for biding his time. As compared with their less prudently constituted fellows, these men are like bill-discounters who have to deal with spendthrifts. It is only the cleverest of them, however, who are aware how many men are eagerly desirous to get matters settled out of hand, even at a loss, and to have done with bother. Bother does not affect *them*, and they are therefore fortunately ignorant of the jar and jangle that it causes in the whole harmony of Being in others: otherwise they would take even greater advantage of them than they do.

Lady Pargiter was by no means what is generally understood by the phrase "a creature of impulse;" she inherited the caution and total absence of sentiment of her father the money-lender; but she lacked his heavenly temper. No ill-behaviour of his clients

ever roused him to passion; one man whom the exigencies of the case compelled him to send to prison (though he had already repaid his original loan twice over) once spat in his face. Mr. Ingot was not a Christian, yet no word of anger crossed his lips. You would never have discovered that he had been insulted, unless you had been a Taxing Master and had had that particular Bill of Costs relating to the offender under your consideration. But Lady Pargiter, besides an ungovernable temper, had been very rich for years, which is a great hindrance to patience. The most engaging of epicures once observed to me in a moment of confidence (it was after some canvas-backed ducks), "I like everything good, and very often, and a great deal of it." And Lady Pargiter, though not in matters relating to the table, had the same tastes. She liked her own way always, and to have it at once.

It was this difference of character between her ladyship and Mr. Signet that made the combat between them over Matthew Helston's missing body so much more equal than it looked to be. For, at the first blush, her ladyship would have appeared to have both legal and moral right upon her side.

Mr. Signet's confidential agent had disappeared with her diamonds, for which Mr. Signet was therefore responsible. And if she had not been conscious of at least one flaw in her armour, she would without doubt have struck the first blow. Her not having done so had indeed to Mr. Signet, who knew her character, appeared strange, though, unlike Mr.

Brail, he could not allow it to have been so strange that it ought to have suggested the reason. But now her whole conduct was explicable enough, even to her having inspired the paragraph in the morning paper which had so deeply offended him. Unable to restrain her impatience, yet not daring to demand the money from him point-blank, she had used that device to draw from him an acknowledgment of his indebtedness; and, but for Rutherford's evidence, might have succeeded. It was likely enough that Mr. Signet should have communicated with her, and if so he could hardly have expressed his sorrow for what had happened, and his hopes that the jewels might be recovered, without admitting his responsibility. But now nothing was further from his thoughts. If he had decided upon fighting a desperate cause, with nothing but the cabman's evidence to back it, how much more was he ready to do battle now! For not only, supposing Miss Selwood's information was correct, had he discovered the weak point of her ladyship's case, but was more convinced than ever that she had the diamonds in her possession; it might have been by bribing Helston, or even by murdering him, but "somehow or other," he said to himself, "that woman has got them." For a long-headed, cautious man of business, it was extraordinary how he loathed Lady Pargiter; his confidence in Patty was perhaps as much owing to her evident hatred of her mistress as to the assistance her testimony promised to him. The accusations which her ladyship had been so imprudent as to make against him had aroused his

deepest resentment, for if there was one thing on which he prided himself (and there were many) it was his honesty. This sentiment was quite apart from the sensitiveness with which Sabey resented the least slur upon her husband's honour; he had the pride of the British tradesman, in that he had paid his way, and made it; had not been bankrupt; and had never, or hardly ever, taken advantage of a fellow-creature, except in the way of business. Moreover—and this he plumed himself upon more than all—he had refrained from doing dishonest acts on several occasions when he might have done them with impunity. Such slanders as Lady Pargiter's were not only galling to a mind thus conscious of its own rectitude, but threatened his credit. Her ladyship's immense wealth gave her great influence; but, on the other hand, reflected Mr. Signet, if she was only a little more imprudent, would make her well worth "shooting at" in an action for damages.

On that Sunday afternoon Mr. Brail and his employer had a long discussion upon the plan of the coming campaign; for that there would be a fight with Lady Pargiter they took for granted. The detective was for remaining quite quiet, or, as I am sorry to say, he had the discourtesy to express it, for "giving the woman plenty of rope;" but Mr. Signet was eager for action. In the end a compromise was effected: it was decided that no direct attack should be made against the enemy, but a flank movement, and with such a show of force as might draw him from his entrenchments. A paragraph was to be

written to the newspapers taking quite another view of the disappearance of the diamonds than that which had been already made public. Mr. Signet accordingly retired to an upstairs apartment, and devoted himself for some hours to composition: it was a line he was not used to, but for which in his secret heart he imagined himself to have a natural bent; only, he was too modest to compose in the presence of another person. Give him solitude, however—and a dictionary—and the result was one with which he was generally well content.

On the present occasion he elaborated quite a treatise upon the annals of his respectable firm: how it had begun in obscurity, progressed through integrity and attention to business, and culminated in "one of the largest establishments connected with jewels and the precious metals in the City of London." Then he described the "system" on which the establishment worked, and showed it to be faultless. One of the precautions it took was only to employ assistants after the pattern of the members of the firm themselves—namely, of the most unblemished character. Under such circumstances it was impossible, he argued, that Messrs. Star and Signet could be morally responsible for any loss whatever: nevertheless, they were always prepared to accept their responsibilities, however gigantic, which the extent of their resources easily enabled them to do. As to the mysterious disappearance, however, of Lady Pargiter's diamonds, a contemporary had fallen into the error of supposing that Messrs. Star and Signet admitted a liability which in fact

lay altogether elsewhere, as they had written and other evidence to prove.

The space occupied by the missing man in this eloquent composition, notwithstanding that it was a little long and decidedly discursive, was about three lines; nor were the jewels themselves much dwelt upon—with the ingenious design of hinting that their loss was Lady Pargiter's business; but as a monograph on the House of Star and Signet, it was superb.

Mr. Brail's face said so, as his employer read out the rolling periods in a sonorous voice.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" he said, when the reading was finished. "The style is—dear me—" he looked round, as if for a fitting adjective, and his eye, lighting upon a ticket appended to an Aphrodite in frosted silver, found what it sought—"very chaste. I had no idea, sir, you possessed the literary gift. But it won't do for the newspapers."

"Won't do?" cried Mr. Signet, the expression of his face changing from gratified pride to an irritation that was almost truculent. "What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing, my dear sir: in its own way it's perfect; but for a newspaper it's too good."

Mr. Signet's brow relaxed: he himself thought that there was a waste of force in composing such an essay for a penny daily; but still, a man of genius can't suit his style to the lower classes: moreover, he wanted to see it in print.

"It's all true, and it's all very pretty," continued his critic: "and you needn't waste it, you know: it

will do admirably for a Christmas advertisement" [Mr. Signet shuddered]; "but it shows too much the source from which it comes. Apart from its excellence (which itself, my dear sir, would betray its author), it has too much of Star and Signet in it. To use a vulgar image, it smells of the shop."

"Smells of the shop?" repeated Mr. Signet, putting the manuscript mechanically to his nose. "Not a bit of it. You would not have me write about my jewels without speaking of myself?"

"Certainly not; not about *your* jewels; but we are concerning ourselves with Lady Pargiter's jewels. It is she, we contend, who has lost them, or got them: you should have condoled with her, just as the other fellow did with you."

"I couldn't do it," said Mr. Signet candidly. "She's a thief and a liar."

"Just so," answered the other cheerfully; "but it is injudicious to prove it by praising our own truth and integrity. Put it on Matthew Helston's shoulders. Adopt a tone of virtuous indignation. Why should a man 'poor but honest' be suspected of a crime, because the person who has suffered—or, rather, has apparently suffered—is rich and powerful? It is not worth our while, let them understand, to defend ourselves in this matter, but we feel that something is owing to the character of a tried and faithful servant—a man we have trusted with untold gold, and priceless articles of *vertu*. I am no scholar, like you, Mr. Signet, but I know the Public and what tickles 'em, and while you were upstairs I just ventured to throw together my own views of how the

thing should run, and here they are. Perhaps you would kindly put 'em into proper shape."

The few sentences the detective had jotted down in his note-book were certainly not to be compared to the ornate production of Mr. Signet; but they did not lack a certain vigour, which was the more creditable to him considering that he didn't believe a word he wrote. For he still secretly stuck to his first view that Helston had made off with the jewels.

"Dear me," said Mr. Signet, "this is very bald—and—um, commonplace. 'Respectable young man,' 'well connected,' 'stain of reproach,' 'confidence of employer.' However, I dare say I can make something of it—'wreck of a household'—'suspend their opinion.'—That seems all right."

"Then you can conclude," said Mr. Brail, "with your own admirable hit against Lady Pargiter."

Mr. Signet nodded adhesion; he was glad that all his labour was not to be thrown away, and he was beginning to be pleased with this new and improved version of the affair for a reason that even the detective could not have fathomed. His thus putting publicly forward his confidence in Helston's integrity could not but be gratifying to Amy Thurlow.

CHAPTER IV.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE LADIES.

RICH men who can afford to neglect their business, or idle men who have none, have exceptional opportunities (though it does not appear that they universally take advantage of them) of cultivating the domestic affections. It is curious, when one comes to think of it, what a very small portion of his life a man in business, or in one of the professions (if he practises as well as professes), passes in the society of his wife and children. He sees them at breakfast-time, and that is in many cases absolutely the only time that he sets eyes upon his little ones, for he does not come home to his late dinner till they are gone to bed. In the case of his grown-up progeny he dines and spends the evening with them—and, except on Sundays, that is all the intercourse between them. A vast deal more of his time—that is, of his life—is spent with Tom, Dick, and Harry in the Law Courts, or (I regret to add) during his afternoon rubbers at the club, than in the society of his nearest and dearest.

Tom and Dick are scarcely aware, perhaps, that he *is* married; and, on the other hand, his family are not much interested in Tom and Dick. He passes, in fact, two separate existences, though we are in the habit of speaking and thinking of him as if he had but one. Nature, I think, is kind in this matter, or one would fear that the absent Pater-

familias would be looked upon by his offspring more as a mere Breadwinner, and less as a Father, than is the case with the male parent who can afford to stop at home and cultivate the home affections. The stay-at-home, however, fortunately doesn't always cultivate them. I have known families who complain that dear papa has no occupation of his own, and therefore worries himself (i.e. insists on meddling) about matters of the house. We all know what a hunting man is within doors during a hard frost; and think of having an infliction of the same sort *always!* These things no doubt tend to equalise matters; and may be set down on the *per contra* side. The man of business and the barrister can scarcely become unpopular at home through being too much there.

In the case of the little household in Cavendish Grove, Uncle Stephen was generally to be found on the nest, while poor Matthew, before he left it altogether in so mysterious a fashion, had to forage far away for food from morn to eve; and the same fate, though he had no household at present, was Mr. Frank Barlow's. On Sundays, of course, that gentleman was at leisure, and I am afraid Mr. Signet took this fact into his calculations in deferring to bring to No. 7 the tidings he had received from Miss Selwood, until Monday. I cannot persuade myself that it was sheer respect for the Sabbath, when he had passed its morning in interviewing that young lady, and its afternoon in literary composition.

He called about eleven o'clock, when all really

hardworking lawyers have been in their cobwebs for an hour, and most of them have caught a fly or two, and asked boldly for Miss Thurlow. He was shown into the dining-room, where that young lady at once joined him; he did not perhaps quite understand that it was for Matthew's sake she could not afford to lose a moment, but set down her promptness to a motive more complimentary to himself. Her welcome, however, though perfectly genuine—for how could she be otherwise than eager to hear his news?—was far from demonstrative. She did not return the pressure of his hand, and looked so grave in answer to his "*My dear Miss Thurlow,*" and the sympathetic manner which accompanied it, that one less conscious of his own merits, and of the happiness he proposed to confer, might have imagined that she designed to reprove him. She had cause enough for gravity, poor soul, as they all had in that house; but her air was designedly more distant than it had been on the last occasion. This was because she had assured Mr. Barlow that nothing should induce her to alter her behaviour to Mr. Signet.

On the previous day they had had a long discussion about him, in the course of which Mr. Barlow had said some hard things of the worthy jeweller. He had called him a self-seeking, coarse-grained, grasping fellow, who—notwithstanding any pretensions he might make to good feeling—had nothing in view but his own ends.

"I don't think he is grasping," Amy had rejoined, without any reference to the other charges; "on the contrary, considering that he has so much money,

and has made most of it himself, he appears to me to be rather careless of expenditure."

"He is ostentatious enough, no doubt."

"No, I don't think he is ostentatious, Frank."

Her reading of Mr. Signet's character was so far correct: he was fond of money—that is to say, he had the British trader's delight in turning the nimble ninepence—but he was too shrewd to be avaricious. If he did not know that *miser* was the Latin for miserable, he felt that they were synonymous terms. Schemes for scraping and saving were abhorrent to him. He gave employes excellent wages, and upon the whole they liked him. And he treated himself to anything to which he took a fancy, regardless of its price. He was about to measure his purse against Lady Pargiter's quite as much from his personal dislike of her as with a view of evading his responsibility with respect to the jewels, though indeed he firmly believed she had got them.

It is not to be supposed that, even yet, Mr. Frank Barlow was jealous of a man double his own age and little more than half his height, but his pretensions, which he by this time well understood, were naturally offensive to him. It was indeed to the last degree impudent of the man to entertain them, knowing as he did that Miss Thurlow was engaged; but, on the other hand, he had never made any actual proposal to her; and, if he did, Amy had an all-sufficient answer to it. Under other circumstances, no doubt, she would have taken measures for dismissing him at once: but it seemed monstrous to her, after that communication of Mr. Durham's to him,

that the jeweller should still entertain such hopes; and his aid and countenance were just now so necessary to poor Matthew, even though it were only to his memory. Moreover, the whole case lay in Mr. Signet's hands, and on him they were dependent for those tidings which, to one at least in that household, had become the only thing to which her ears were open.

"I will not make an enemy of Mr. Signet, if I can help it," Amy had said; not with vehemence, for she showed no sign of "temper," but with a resolution that not even a lover's remonstrance could shake.

"I don't ask you to be rude to him," returned Mr. Barlow, rather weakly, for he himself was a good deal "put out;" "but you ought not to encourage him."

"Encourage him, Frank?"

There was an indignation in her eyes as well as her tone which should have made the young lawyer repent having used so strong a term; but he prided himself on never making any allegation without proofs — nor even then, if it was actionable.

"You are wearing the ring he gave you on your finger, Amy," he said. "You are well aware that at one time he had the intention of proposing to you — yes, you are; if you could not gather it from his own conduct to yourself, his behaviour when poor Matthew told him you were engaged to me put that beyond a doubt. And being purse-proud, and not a gentleman, nor anything like it, he still thinks he has a chance.

Amy made a gesture of disbelief, that had also something of disgust in it.

"Supposing even that you are right, Frank, which I utterly refuse to believe," she said, "you have still to explain how I have encouraged him."

"He calls on you personally, and you do not refuse to see him; you would have seen him alone yesterday if I had not prevented it. His manner towards you—his affectation of sympathy, that is—is most impertinent."

"But why should he not feel sympathy with us?" she urged; "a heart of stone might feel it."

"Then let him be sympathetic with *me*. Let him talk to *me* with his hand upon his heart, and in a voice broken with emotion. It's all a piece of acting."

"Still, you have not yet come to your charge against me of encouraging him."

"Well, you encourage him by pretending to believe his sympathy to be genuine; by seeing him alone; by talking to him in a confidential manner. I should wish—if it is necessary to see the man at all—that your manner to him should be altered."

"My dear Frank," said Amy, speaking very gently, "I must see Mr. Signet when he comes, because he is the bearer of tidings which have a vital interest for me. To please you—though I think it cruel and unjust of you to entertain such suspicions of him, under the circumstances in which my poor sister and I are placed; any man with a heart would as soon think of making love over a death-bed—to please you I will not see Mr. Signet alone; but he

has been on the whole both kind and considerate to us, and I cannot make him the ill return of being uncivil to him. I see nothing to find fault with in my manner towards him, and I shall maintain it."

And that was why she was so cold and grave to Mr. Signet when he called the next day.

That gentleman, however, put this down as a consequence of the domestic calamity, which each hour of course was rendering more deep and hopeless.

"And how is your poor sister, Miss Thurlow?"

"Her state is most distressing; but on hearing you were here she at once expressed a wish to see you. Will you kindly come with me?" and she moved towards the door, which at her entrance she had not closed behind her.

"Well, I wanted to say a few words to you first and alone. I have the strangest news to communicate to you concerning Lady Pargiter."

"That will interest my sister, Mr. Signet, equally with myself. Be good enough to step this way."

Her face was flushed with the recollection of her promise to Frank—that is, of the reason why she was declining to let Mr. Signet speak with her alone; but her voice was very firm. It was impossible to mistake her object, and Mr. Signet set it down to a last desperate attempt upon the young woman's part to resist his fascinations. A struggle of this kind was under the circumstances only to have been expected. There were certain ties to be sundered; he did not like her the less for not dropping into his hands like a ripe peach. Moreover, he found it

necessary to obey her, and followed her at once into the parlour where Sabey was sitting, fronting the window as usual, with some baby-clothes upon her lap. It was curious, and very sad, to see the change those few days of misery had wrought in her. Her figure, always slight, had become almost emaciated. Her youth was gone, its brightness and buoyancy exchanged for a certain haggard keenness—such as is generally to be seen only in the vicious and the degraded; only her eyes redeemed her from any such associations. Naturally large, they had now attained abnormal dimensions; or perhaps the shrinking of the face made it appear so, while the expression of them was pitiful to the last degree: “homes of silent prayer” they might well indeed be called; but with a certain look of resolve in them, also, which is not the usual accompaniment of religious resignation.

“It is very kind of you, Mr. Signet, to come to us so often,” she said; and the jeweller noticed that her voice, though low, had a greater clearness than on the last occasion. “Your news is the only news that has any interest for us now.”

“I only wish it were better, my dear Mrs. Helston. Still”—for he noticed the little colour in her cheeks paled away at once—“I have at least no worse news for you than on Saturday. It chiefly relates to Lady Pargiter. Your husband and I always took the same view of her ladyship’s character; but nothing that we thought of her can come up to what I have now cause to believe her capable of. Conceive her attempting to hold me responsible for her diamonds, without even possessing my agent’s

receipt for them. From information received—— However, to such friends as yourself and your excellent sister, I may say exactly what has occurred."

Then he repeated to them the revelation made by Miss Patty Selwood. When all was told, and perceiving that Mrs. Helston—to whom he had mainly addressed himself—was by no means so moved by the recital as he had expected, he turned to her sister.

"Mrs. Helston does not appear to comprehend the enormous importance that the absence of this receipt may be to us?"

"Nay, rather, Mr. Signet, she does not—nor, I confess, do I—perceive its bearing upon the disappearance of her husband."

The jeweller—whom the glitter of the diamonds had for the time, as it were, blinded to this other particular—hastened to repair his mistake.

"Then let me explain that at once," he said. "The fact I speak of has a very strong though indirect relation to your domestic calamity. It makes Rutherford's evidence against Lady Pargiter of much more weight; it points to her guilty knowledge of the robbery, and therefore by implication of what has become of Mr. Helston, and in this light it is hopeful."

"In what respect?" inquired Amy.

"Well; though she may have stolen the diamonds, it is unlikely that she would have gone to the length of——of doing any bodily harm to Mr. Helston. She has probably only put him out of the

way. I mean that since there must needs be some guilty person in this matter, it is better if it turns out to be her ladyship than any ordinary criminal who might stick at nothing. It is this reflection that gives me such satisfaction in her waiting-maid's statement."

"But it is incredible," said Amy, "that even Lady Pargiter—or indeed any woman—could have——"

"Oh, I beg your pardon; it's just *like* a woman," interrupted Mr. Signet; "or rather, I should say," he added, with a sudden remembrance of the sex of his auditors, "it is just like the conduct of a person unused to commit this class of crimes. Her course of conduct has been so audacious, and so careless of the consequences. She sends her own servant to recall the cab (which, remember, she has since denied); she persuades Mr. Helston to remain under her roof on the pretence of hospitality, and then causes him to be deprived by force of that which had been entrusted to his charge; but, being honest and faithful, he refuses—no matter under what pressure—to furnish her with the receipt which constitutes her legal claim."

"But should not Matthew have given her the receipt before he quitted the house the first time?" observed Amy.

"A very judicious remark," observed Mr. Signet; "the very one that Mr. Brail, my detective, himself made when I suggested my view of the case. Yes, she had his receipt no doubt; but, somehow or other, Mr. Helston must have had the opportunity

of destroying it afterwards, when he perceived her wicked intentions. That is only a bare supposition, of course; but the whole affair is at present guess-work. Nothing that we can suppose is, at all events, more improbable than what has actually occurred; and my explanation of the matter accounts for both the absence of the receipt and the disappearance of Mr. Helston. As to the latter—which is, of course, our main consideration—I am unable to dismiss from my mind the circumstance that your excellent husband was personally obnoxious to Lady Pargiter. This, though it may not absolutely account for everything, may be a factor in the case. She may have attempted to bribe him; there may have been a quarrel; and, being of an ungovernable temper and utterly unscrupulous, she may have been driven further than she intended.”

“Do you mean to suggest,” said Sabey in hollow tones, “that this woman has *murdered* my husband?”

“My dear madam, nothing of the kind. You alarm me above measure, and make me regret having reposed my confidence in you. To one person—that is to say, without a witness—one can say anything; that is why I was so anxious to speak with Miss Thurlow alone upon this matter. I hope another time that she will understand that I have a reason for what I ask. But before a witness—that is to say, when you are both present—it is unadvisable to open one’s heart too unreservedly. Not that Lady Pargiter has any right to complain of my saying anything. The infamous accusations of dis-

honesty that she has made against myself and Mr. Helston——”

“When? Where?” inquired Sabey with sudden eagerness; her liquid eyes aglow, like the phosphorescent gleam of some ocean lake.

“She made them to Mr. Brail; she made them to her waiting-maid; she caused them, without doubt, to find their way on Saturday into print. By-the-by, I have another newspaper paragraph to show you that concerns us all, Mrs. Helston.”

“Let me see it—give it to me,” she cried, with eagerness. Amy made no attempt to stop her: the infamous suggestions against her husband's honour of which she was already in possession had had, as Uncle Stephen had predicted, by no means a bad effect upon Sabey. Strange to say, indeed, they might be said to have had a good effect: they had substituted for her brooding, an indignant, almost defiant, frame of mind; and for her despondent and despairing thoughts all sorts of schemes for vindicating his innocence, which, however vague and impracticable, were by comparison a wholesome mental pabulum. It gave her a sort of galvanic strength, and—what was of real consequence—a desire for life, though but for a single end. Even though her Matthew were lost for ever to her, she would not wish to die before she had given the lie to his detractors and cleared his memory from reproach.

“This paper takes quite a different view,” observed Mr. Signet encouragingly.

“Yes; I suppose I ought to be thankful for it,” said Sabey with a sad smile.

"The writer, at all events, meant kindly," put in Amy, who was reading over her shoulder.

"I am sure he did," said the jeweller, blushing; not because he had written the paragraph—for, as we know, that was not the case—but because he knew that he was producing the impression that he had done so.

"Have you brought me back Matthew's picture?" inquired Sabey softly.

"No, not to-day; yesterday was Sunday, you know—a *dies non*—I shall hope to bring it you"—here he turned to Amy—"to-morrow."

"My sister will be glad to have it back," said Amy. It was very disagreeable to Mr. Signet that she would persist in avoiding any reference to herself. He was discouraged by the result of his visit altogether, though he felt that he might have made a worse impression but for his own dexterity. The indifference these women had manifested to his news about the diamonds was most extraordinary; of course they were anxious about Helston, but they seemed to have no sense of comparison. He began to think that Amy had not quite so much intelligence as he had credited her with; and yet, somehow, he did not think less of her on that account. The tenderness of the Dove seemed in her case preferable to the sagacity of the Owl; and yet, with all her quietness, he was aware that there was a certain air of self-confidence about her—the natural fruit, had he but known it, of independence of character; and that also gave him satisfaction. He felt that a woman of that kind, if properly dressed (so he put

it, as though she had been *on* the board instead of *at* it), would look uncommonly well at the head of his table.

Amy did not accompany him—as on the last occasion—to the front door; but rang the parlour bell for the maid-servant; and he could not but perceive that the pressure of his hand at parting was not returned.

This wounded his self-love. Still, all previous engagements notwithstanding, he could scarcely conceive her refusing the sole surviving representative of Star and Signet if he should really condescend to propose to her. At present he had not positively made up his mind to do so. If Lady Pargiter's guilt should be brought home to her, he would offer the girl his hand; but if it should turn out that Matthew Helston had absconded with the jewels, he was not sure his passion for her was so strong that it would survive her connection with disgrace.

CHAPTER V.

UNCLE STEPHEN'S VIEW.

It sometimes happens, though very rarely, that some great passenger ship, bound for America or the Indies, will go down in the waste of ocean and leave not a vestige of her existence behind her; and even then in the minds of those who have had their dear ones entrusted to her treacherous keeping there is hope. She may have been delayed by

contrary winds, or beaten out of her course; then when such time elapses as to forbid that supposition, it is possible—just possible—that she may have been wrecked on some out-of-the-way if not unknown coast, and her living tenants saved. But even this well-nigh desperate case affords no parallel in respect of its lack of hope to that of the sudden disappearance in the waste of London of an honest man entrusted with a great treasure. Every suggestion of common sense points to but one explanation of such a mystery. To those who believe in his integrity, he is as a dead man; and in their eyes it is better so, since otherwise he must needs be what he appears in the eyes of the world at large—a Thief.

Into the minds of Matthew Helston's wife and sister this last supposition, indeed, could never enter; but day by day the other alternative was being urged with greater force upon them. It was a sort of *peine forte et dure* of the mind; the weight upon it was increased hour by hour—"as much as they could bear," as the old brutal statute said, "and more."

Sabey still took her meals—nourishment sufficient to keep life and even strength within her, for strength, she vaguely felt, might, for Matthew's sake, be required of her; but she took them in her own room. Society, even that of her own belongings, was become too much for her; to conversation, even upon the subject next her heart, she could no longer give attention. Mr. Barlow saw her every evening for a few minutes; she looked for his coming vaguely

—he might be the bearer of some news. And Uncle Stephen would come and sit in silence by her side, with her little hand clasped in his, for half an hour at a time. But so cruel was her case, that friendship and sympathy had lost their power.

Both men were too honest and too wise any longer to encourage hope within her, and it was for that alone she yearned; and the visits of Mr. Signet were, for this reason, absolutely more welcome to her.

Amy's presence, on the other hand, was very precious: not from the habit of old days and their associations unconsciously working with her, but because Amy alone knew what she felt, and could, in part at least, share her sorrow. She insisted, however, on her sister's dining below stairs.

"It is hard enough for dear Uncle Stephen as it is," she said: "I am very hard upon him myself——"

"He understands, darling," put in Amy.

"I hope so, I trust so. Matthew owes him so much; tell him if I live, and if——" (she would have said, supposing her husband was not alive, but she could not frame the words)—"I will repay him with my utmost love and service; but just now, I can only think of Matthew."

On the evening of Mr. Signet's visit, the three had a long talk together over Matthew's case. Mr. Barlow, of course, had seen the second newspaper paragraph, and brought it home with him.

He ascribed it to the mere spirit of newspaper opposition; that since one journal had taken sides

with Lady Pargiter, its rival leant towards Mr. Signet's view of the case.

"I don't think the man himself could have written it," he said; "it is not sufficiently egotistic: he could never have kept Star and Signet out of it for so many lines."

"We understood from Mr. Signet's manner to-day," said Amy, using the plural by design, "that he had, at all events, instigated the paragraph."

"Instigated?" cried Uncle Stephen; "it's his own! I could swear to it as though I had seen his handwriting. That *mens conscia recti* of his betrays him."

"It is not badly composed, however, for the purpose for which it is intended," remarked Mr. Barlow, who had seen nothing inappropriate in the quotation. "As a defence of Matthew's moral character it is of course contemptible, but it is likely enough to make Lady Pargiter show her hand."

Uncle Stephen was about to speak, but altered his mind.

"You mean to say that there will be a lawsuit?" inquired Amy.

"Yes, my dear; Mr. Signet, as I understand, is resolved, supposing the waiting-maid's evidence to be trustworthy, to fight it out."

"I did not like to mention it to him this morning," said Amy, "because it might look as if we thought he was not doing his best: but why does not Mr. Signet offer a reward for the recovery of the jewels? That would surely help us."

"Very likely," observed Mr. Barlow cynically;

"but the question he puts to himself is, will it help *him*? His present object is to pretend the loss of the jewels is no business of his, and whoever first offers the reward will appear to make it his business."

"Why should not *we* offer a reward for Matthew?" said Uncle Stephen. "That's our business, surely."

"I have thought of that, of course," replied Mr. Barlow, with rather a pitying air. "But looking at the matter all round, I think we had better not do that—at least, at present. The Police—all constituted authorities, in fact—are doing their best to elucidate the affair; and an offer of a reward would only call more public attention to it—which is far from desirable."

"Why?" inquired Amy.

"Well, really, my dear, you astonish me by such a question. Is not your poor brother-in-law's name bandied about already sufficiently? And yet, you may be sure, these paragraphs are but the beginning of things. If you heard, as I do, what is said in every omnibus and railway carriage——"

"I should not care what I heard," interrupted Amy, "if only more publicity could assist us in finding Matthew. What is the opinion of the whole world, to Sabey—who is the person we have alone to consider in this matter—compared with that?"

"That sort of publicity could not assist us, Amy," said Mr. Barlow; he spoke quietly, without the least trace of irritation, but his face showed a rising colour.

"I think—not immediately, perhaps, but very

shoutly—Sibey ought herself to be consulted in the matter," observed Uncle Stephen. "She is, as Amy says, our first consideration; and no inconvenience or distress of mind to anyone—to ourselves, for example—ought to prevent our leaving a stone unturned."

"You will, of course, act, Mr. Durham, as you think proper," replied the lawyer.

Nothing more, for the moment, was said on this point; but when Amy had withdrawn to join her sister, "I hope," said Mr. Barrow, "you did not suppose that it was with any reference to myself—that is, with respect to the reputation of the family with which I am about to be connected—that I opposed any reward being offered with regard to Matthew?"

"Well, to say the truth, Barrow, I thought that might have weighed with you."

"I think it did not—I hope it did not, Mr. Durham. But I confess I object to our taking any action which may be supposed to be in common with Mr. Sigbee. He is in my opinion pursuing a most unwarrantable and unscrupulous course. He knows that Lady Dingley has no more possession of those diamonds than I have."

"I certainly think it very improbable," mused Mr. Durham.

"Impossible? It is impossible. The notion that the woman should have stolen her own jewels is monstrous. As to the receipt—it may have been destroyed by accident; that matters not to us one bit. The question of us is not where the jewels are, but where is Matthew?"

"And what is your view?"

"I believe John Rutherford could tell us all, if he chose. He has trumped up that story about having left his fare in Moor Street. I don't believe one word of it."

"Then you must needs believe he has murdered him?"

"I hope for the best, and in God's mercy, Mr. Durham; but that is my conviction," answered Mr. Barlow gravely. "There is no other way out of it."

"There are plenty of ways out of it, my dear sir, if we had but the wit to see them," returned Uncle Stephen. "From all I can gather, the cabman is an honest fellow, and—which weighs with me still more—he was personally attached to Matthew. A man may murder a stranger for money, or even a blood relation whom he does not love; but not his friend. Sabey has been kind to Rutherford's wife, and he has shown himself sensible of it. He must have had both gratitude and liking to contend against. We are presupposing a monstrosity in imputing murder, under such circumstances, to such a man. Besides, he has had scores of opportunities before this one."

"Yes; but this was the last chance, and he knew it. That some one has done it is morally certain. Do you prefer to think Lady Pargiter the murderer?"

"Don't let us use such words, Mr. Barlow, till they have been justified by the event," said Uncle Stephen reprovingly.

"Do you think Matthew would have parted with those jewels, then, and kept his life?"

"Mr. Barlow," returned Uncle Stephen, "I know Matthew Helston better than you do, and certainly respect him as much. Of course I do not think that."

"Then, in my opinion, all that we have to hope for is this—that, since the robbery must in all probability have been committed by several persons, in time they will quarrel among themselves, and Matthew's memory will be cleared of stain."

"That does not follow," said Uncle Stephen. "When M. d'Anglade was in prison, where he died, after the torture, for his supposed robbery of the Count de Montgomery, it is on record that the whole body of Paris thieves were cognisant that two of their number—Belestre and Gagnard—were the real culprits."

"Then it appears that you are more hopeless respecting this terrible affair than even I am?"

"No: I cannot say I am without hope," answered Uncle Stephen thoughtfully. "I have lived too long in the world not to know how expectation is baulked, even though it be of a misfortune."

"But you feel certain that the diamonds have been stolen?"

Mr. Durham hesitated; held his chin in his hand, as was his habit when thinking deeply; and then slowly replied: "Yes: we must suppose them to have been stolen."

"Then Matthew, as you agreed with me, cannot be alive?"

"I did not say that, Barlow: in my opinion, he would not have parted with what was entrusted to him, save with his life. But they might have been forced from him. This affair is not one of alternatives—that is the view of the police, no doubt; but it is much too shallow and narrow. Ten thousand things *may* have taken place where one thing does take place. I am inclined to think that in this case something very abnormal, and out of the policeman's beat, has happened. To Sabey and Amy—dear souls—I may have appeared indifferent: I did not wish to melt their waxen hearts by too much show of sympathy; but night and day, of late, I have thought of nothing but Matthew."

"Then you have a theory to account for his disappearance?" exclaimed Mr. Barlow eagerly. He would have called his companion "a very bad man of business" (meaning a "dreamer"), but he had a genuine admiration for his abilities; and he thought it quite possible that, where practical minds were at fault, his ingenuity might supply a clue.

"Well, yes, I have. It seems wild enough, but then the whole affair is wild, and *similia similibus curantur*, as Mr. Signet would say. And, again, it is not a rosewater solution of the enigma; one cannot object to it that it makes things too pleasant. Still, it's better than murder or robbery."

"If your explanation avoids these two horns of the dilemma, it must indeed be worth hearing," said Mr. Barlow.

"Turn the key in the door, will you?" continued Uncle Stephen. "I should not like even Amy to

come in just now. I feel that I could not pull myself together in a moment." The old man's face indeed showed a pain that was distressing to behold, and his voice was feeble and broken. "You must excuse me, sir," he said, with a certain dignity, "but this lad is dear to me as the apple of my eye. Whatever I tell you now—whether it turns out to be the fact or otherwise—I must have your promise that it will be kept secret."

"You may trust me, Mr. Durham: I shall regard you as a client in consultation."

A smile flitted across Uncle Stephen's face, but only to leave it graver than before.

"I have noticed for some time," he said, "a certain depression in Matthew; he has been always quiet and even depressed, you will say, since you have known him—though I remember him, just after his marriage, poor fellow, full of hope and joy; but of late his melancholy has deepened. It has seemed to me as though he were always making an effort to throw off some monopolising thought. Has that struck *you*, Mr. Barlow?"

The lawyer shook his head.

"No: I have not noticed any deeper depression. He always seemed to me a disappointed man, and, if I may say so without offence, to have entertained, somewhat weakly, a sort of grudge against the general arrangements of the world in consequence. I am speaking very plainly."

"No matter, sir; if ever there was a time for plain speech, it has come now," returned Uncle Stephen. "As to the 'grudge,' I have noticed that

too, but only quite recently. His talk to me of late has been vehement against the unjust distribution of wealth, and of the harshness engendered by habits of luxury. I thought nothing of that; it is a poor man's privilege; and to one with Matthew's gifts and sense of justice, many things must have seemed hard. But, within the last few weeks, his prejudices have taken a more personal direction. The dislike he expressed for Lady Pargiter—who seems to be a most contemptible woman—was quite unworthy of him, and, curiously enough, this seemed to extend to her inanimate possessions—I refer to her diamonds."

The lawyer bowed his head; he was attentive enough to what his companion said, but had no notion whither he was driving.

"The diamonds, you see," continued Uncle Stephen, with the air of one who talks and reflects at the same time, "have been the immediate cause of much inconvenience and worry to him; they took him from his home of nights, and exposed him to humiliations, and—as I have since learnt—even to insults. How strange it seems that a few sparkling stones, which only served to make more hideous the woman that owned them, should be the cause of such trouble; stones that might have been turned to bread, or, in worthier hands, have realised the dreams of science!"

"But, excuse me, Mr. Durham, that will not hold water," interrupted the lawyer. "When that comes to be tried, it means crack-brained socialism—mere madness."

"Just so: yet those words, which I have purposely addressed to you as my own, Matthew Helston spoke to me the very night on which he disappeared from us. In my opinion, as in yours, it seems, they were mere madness."

"Good Heavens! do you think he was mad?"

"Of course I should not have thought so had nothing come of it; indeed, as it was, I remember rallying him upon his strange opinions: "If Mr. Signet knew them," I said, "he would be afraid of your dropping those diamonds into the river." And then he answered what I think has now great significance. 'No; if I took them, I should certainly not enrich Father Thames with them'—implying, of course, that he would take them for himself."

"To 'realise the dreams of science,'" observed Mr. Barlow, in a hushed voice; "that is, to furnish the funds for the prosecution of his invention, I suppose. I am afraid a jury——"

"Never mind the juries just now, Mr. Barlow: nevertheless, what you suggest is possible. Poor Madge was no doubt another disturbing element with him; but mainly it was the jewels. My theory (of course it is nothing more, but it has the advantage of explaining *everything*) is that, through dwelling almost exclusively upon this single subject, Matthew's mind became unhinged. Of course there has been method in his madness; he *did* return to Lady Pargiter's (she has lied about that, it seems, and been found out) and afterwards dismissed the cabman with the pretence that he was going to remain in

Moor Street. Then, under the influence of his monomania, he took away the diamonds."

"It is possible," mused the lawyer. "I have known cases quite as black where we have pulled the man through. There is nothing like kleptomania for bamboozling a jury."

"Good Heavens, sir, will you keep your mind clear of juries!" exclaimed Uncle Stephen impatiently. "For my part, I would as soon have diamonds on the brain as twelve men in a box. The mania I speak of has no more to do with kleptomania than has a horse-chestnut with a chestnut horse. It is a mental aberration—analogous to sleep-walking—caused by allowing the thoughts to dwell upon one topic, and those depressed by melancholy are especially subject to it. That is my view of Matthew's case. It explains all that can be explained, and it contains this comfort in it—such aberrations are temporary; so Matthew may yet be restored to us and in his right mind."

It was on the tip of Mr. Barlow's tongue to say, "And the diamonds?" But he thought it might suggest juries, and cause another outbreak: moreover, he had a high opinion of Mr. Durham's intelligence as a psychologist, and thought his theory worth attention.

It was noteworthy that this opinion of Mr. Durham's was the first expression of a doubt from the side of Matthew's friends, not indeed of his innocence, but of his absolute disconnection with the Robbery in Moor Street.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. SIGNET HAS A BAD QUARTER OF AN HOUR.

ON Tuesday morning, when Mr. Signet arrived at his office, he found a business note awaiting him, couched in studiously matter-of-fact language. It was written, to be sure, on pink paper, and had a crest on it that was meant to look as like a coronet as any crest could be which was not one; but then, that was the way in which Lady Pargiter's business letters always arrived.

"Lady Pargiter begs to inform Mr. Signet that she will require her diamonds on Thursday evening next, at ten o'clock."

This simple communication, of which he had received scores before, worded almost precisely in the same manner, almost took the jeweller's breath away. If she had added the postscript which she sometimes did—"Lady Pargiter requests that the person sent with the jewels will be punctual" (though Matthew was always in time), the communication could scarcely have more completely ignored all that had taken place since that fatal Friday.

Mr. Signet's impulse was to sit down and write a violent letter, assuring her ladyship that if her hypocrisy was intended to impose on him in any way, it was altogether thrown away; and hinting that if anybody, in *his* (Mr. Signet's) opinion, was more likely than another to know what had become of Mr. Helston and the jewels, it was Lady Pargiter

herself; but he had the prudence to wait for Mr. Brail's arrival before committing himself to this step.

The detective, though by no means so much moved by her ladyship's letter as his employer had been, attached to it even a greater significance.

"I don't mind being in hot water, Mr. Signet," he said. "Strong language and hustling, and even a rough and tumble with an ugly customer, are quite in my line; but I must feel my feet wherever I go; this water is too *deep* for me, and I cannot pretend to advise you. You must call in a solicitor. Her ladyship has done so already, I'll take my oath of it."

"How do you know that?"

"Lor' bless you, that note is not her writing—or leastways somebody guided her pen. You should have seen her the other day, when I had the honour to call upon her; she was more like a wild cat than a baronet's lady, and all because of these same jewels. If left to herself, she couldn't have written on the subject in this quiet style; no, she's writing under advice. 'It is not your business,' some lawyer has been saying to her, 'whether Mr. Signet has the diamonds or not; you needn't be supposed to know anything about it. Just write, as usual, *I want them by such a date*;' then see what he'll say.' They don't want to strike the first blow, Mr. Signet."

"I don't like lawyers," said the jeweller. "One generally finds when one employs them that the setting costs more than the stone. Moreover, they so contrive matters—with this and that legal proceeding, and their confounded phraseology, which I

believe is written with the ink of the cuttle-fish, so that no one should be able to follow it—that the client loses sight of his own case when once committed to their keeping. For my part, I like to see where I'm going, not to be led like a blind man—to be run over by a waggon-load of steel rails, perhaps, after all.”

“That is a way the lawyers have, no doubt,” assented Mr. Brail coolly; “still, I should send for Cripps.”

Cripps and Archdale were, as the detective was well aware, Messrs. Star and Signet's legal advisers. They dwelt in the East, and were thought to be wise men—after the fashion of the children of this world.

“The first thing Cripps will do,” urged the jeweller, “is to put John Rutherford in gaol. He has come across so very few honest men in his lifetime that he scarcely believes in their existence.”

“His experience, however, is no better as regards the other sex,” argued Mr. Brail. “He won't take it for granted that Lady Pargiter herself is the driven snow. He ain't like the rest of the human race, the natural enemy of a cabman; because, you see, his clients pay for his cabs.”

Perhaps Mr. Signet did not take this circumstance into sufficient account, or perhaps he had a secret suspicion that (except in his own eyes) the case against Lady Pargiter—so far, at all events, as it was affected by Mr. Rutherford's evidence—would appear a weak one; but for the present at least he declined to call in the services of his lawyer.

"No, Brail, I'd rather trust to you to catch her ladyship tripping. When you've put the salt upon her tail, it will be time enough to call in Cripps. I suppose we must take some notice of the woman's letter?"

"Of course, sir; not to do so would be to betray weakness, and yet we must not commit ourselves by putting pen to paper. My advice is that you call in Moor Street, and answer it by word of mouth."

"Don't you think *you'd* better go, Brail?"

"Well, if you're afraid of her ladyship," returned the detective.

"Afraid! What should I be afraid of?" interrupted the jeweller, with a flush of colour that showed how the imputation had gone home. "She can't snap my nose off." Mr. Brail shook his head, but by no means in negation; on the contrary, his face seemed to say—"I am not so sure of that."

"You see, sir, it's my business to be snapped at," said he presently; "and even if I were to lose my nose, it would be but the fortune of war. I have no sort of objection to go to Lady Pargiter's; but what would be the good of it? Her eyes are now open to the fact that I am in your employment; she would not be so frank with me—though it is true she lied considerably even then—as upon the last occasion; whereas to you—as a principal, although her enemy—she would speak her mind."

Mr. Signet did not look as if this prospect was very grateful to him; no doubt it was desirable to learn, if possible, what Lady Pargiter had in her mind, but to hear her speak it—or even a piece of

it—was not a treat to look forward to. On his native heath—in the establishment in Paulet Street—Mr. Signet knew how to meet his enemy; but in Moor Street—among her ladyship's minions, or, still worse, alone with her, with no help within call—he felt that he should be at a disadvantage. He could not be said to be in bodily fear—though, if he had really believed that she had made away with his representative, that might of course have been possible—but he was certainly much dismayed at the notion of a *tête-à-tête* with her.

"I suppose, if I went," said Mr. Signet (for it was pleasant to him to feel that he had still the alternative of not going), "my line would be to hear all she has to say, and to answer as little as possible."

"Just so; only you must stick to your guns, you know."

"Why, really, Brail, one would think you took me for a coward!" exclaimed the jeweller; he felt very indignant with his companion, and not the less so that he was conscious of a certain moisture upon his brow caused by his own secret misgivings.

"Not at all—not at all!" protested the detective; "but I know the influence of women. The arguments of a lady of title in her own house have a certain—what shall I call it?—impetus."

"Oh, hang her impetus!" returned the jeweller. "She won't argue me out of 25,000/.—Well, well, I'll go myself, then, to Moor Street this afternoon."

Mr. Brail replied, "Very good;" but there was a twitching at the corners of his mouth which betrayed

that he was amused. He believed that his employer had fixed the afternoon instead of the morning for his visit, in hopes that he might find Lady Pargiter not at home.

If this had been Mr. Signet's expectation, it was doomed to disappointment. He timed his call (which certainly gave some colour to Mr. Brail's view) at an hour when a lady of fashion is almost certain to be visiting her acquaintances; but his inquiry as to whether her ladyship was within was answered in the affirmative, and he was shown up at once into her boudoir. He had been to Moor Street before, and he felt that there was a difference in the mode of his present reception. He could not be aware, of course, of what was actually the case, that her ladyship had been waiting for him with impatience throughout the day, and had given orders that no one else was to be admitted to her presence; but when he heard the front door clang behind him, he felt that he would have given five pounds to be on the other side of it. Nor did he like being ushered past the usual reception rooms to her ladyship's sanctum on the second floor.

She was sitting at her escritoire when he entered the room, writing—or pretending to write—a letter.

She bowed and pointed to a chair, and for a few moments continued her occupation. Whether her doing so was an intentional impertinence or not, its effect was unfortunate for her; for it gave Mr. Signet time to collect his ideas, and—to say truth—to still a certain fluttering in the region of his

heart, caused by the thought that his duel with this formidable antagonist, and on which so much depended, was about to begin.

"You got my note, I conclude, this morning, Mr. Signet?" she presently observed, with some abruptness.

"Yes, Lady Pargiter; I am here in consequence of it."

She lifted her eyebrows, or rather (for she had none to lift) the skin of her forehead. She intended to signify, in an indifferent way—"Why have you taken so much trouble? A post-card would have done as well." But her eyes belied her would-be careless look; they were fierce and wolfish.

"I thought, my lady, your communication a very extraordinary one, considering the circumstances of the case."

"My communication?" Here her brow came down instead of up, in spite of herself. "Do you mean my note?"

"Yes, madam. You cannot but be aware that your diamonds are not at present in my possession."

"You are very much mistaken, Mr. Signet, for I believe they are." The insult, and its suggestion, were unmistakable. Mr. Signet's swarthy face turned pale, and he did not answer her for some moments.

"I should have thought, madam, that you could scarcely have been ignorant," he said, speaking very slowly, "that since Friday morning last, when Mr. Helston called on you by appointment as usual, he has mysteriously disappeared."

"I have heard something of that;—yes—" (she affected to consider)—"there was a paragraph about it in one of the papers."

"And a policeman called here also, I understood," suggested Mr. Signet; his voice was low, but very clear: Lady Pargiter was still studiously indifferent. It was like the slow scrape of the rapiers before the quick thrust and parry.

"Yes: I saw him. He told me, as you say, that your confidential agent was missing. I was sorry for you, of course, but I did not think it necessary to condole with you in my note; it was only a letter of business, to tell you that I should want my diamonds on Friday."

"Still, as the man was lost in your service, Lady Pargiter, as much as in my own, and more, one would have thought you would have alluded to it, unless you had reasons to the contrary. His disappearance has afflicted his unhappy wife and family beyond expression."

"So I read in the newspaper, Mr. Signet. Still, as I had not the pleasure of their acquaintance, I did not condole with *them*.—Perhaps you have come about some subscription for them; if so, I must decline my aid to any such purpose. Mr. Helston was in your service—as to his being in mine, if I had had any voice in the matter, which I had not, I should have preferred some one else; you knew his worth, it seems; *I* didn't; and of course it is to you his family must look for recompense."

"You take a hard view of the case, Lady Pargiter."

"Hard? I take no view of the case at all, Mr. Signet! Pray let us have done with Mr. Helston."

"And yet you must know that with Mr. Helston your diamonds have also disappeared?"

"I may know it, or believe it, from report; but I have no official information—that is, from yourself—about it. In any case, however, the matter does not concern me. When I say I want my diamonds on Friday, that means I must either have them or their equivalent. The precise sum agreed upon in our memorandum—I have a duplicate of it somewhere—was, I think, 25,000/."

"Then even while this affair remains a mystery, and Mr. Helston (whom I believe to be as innocent as your ladyship in this matter) is still only under suspicion, you would press for what you deem your legal rights?"

"Most certainly I shall do so."

"Perhaps you have not considered, Lady Pargiter, that the very fact of my allowing your claim at this stage of the matter—supposing that I did so—would brand by implication Mr. Matthew Helston as a thief."

"I have certainly not considered that, Mr. Signet; it is a contingency that has never entered into my thoughts; nor does it affect me now one feather's weight. You are taking up my time, sir, to no purpose. On Friday next—as I wrote to you—I demand of you either my diamonds or your money. I have nothing more to say."

She half turned to her desk as if to resume her writing, but he noticed that she still watched him—and with anxiety, too—from the corner of her eye.

"My diamonds or your money!" he repeated to himself fiercely. "Why, this woman is like a highwayman with his 'Your money or your life.' Nay, she *is* a highwayman; a robber—for aught I know, a murderer. I will never pay her a sixpence."

Then he answered, with quiet distinctness as before: "You urge your claim with great severity, madam; with a harshness, indeed, that reminds me of Shylock."

"Of *whom*?" inquired Lady Pargiter, who, perhaps fortunately for the jeweller, was not a student of Shakespeare.

"Well, I will rather say, you remind me of your father, madam, in his strict adhesion to his legal claims. He would always have his bond—and so shall you. The strict letter of it, and not an iota more."

"I don't want any more than 25,000*l.*, Mr. Signet," replied the other coldly; "that is, if it is paid by Friday; after that date I shall require the interest at five per cent. I think that was mentioned in the memorandum?"

"It was, Lady Pargiter. I have been refreshing my memory with that document this morning. It especially makes me responsible for the jewels in the person of my agent, whose receipt——"

He paused here by design. The boudoir was at the back of the house, removed from all noise and movement; there were but three things that struck upon his ear, as he spoke that pregnant word—the beating of his own heart; the ticking of the French clock upon the mantelpiece; and the breathing of

Lady Pargiter—which had suddenly become hard and loud: in her intense excitement, that equine peculiarity she had of “snorting” had been involuntarily developed: her eyes had grown unnaturally prominent. Mr. Signet felt certain that the waiting-maid’s information was to be relied on.

“In the person of my agent, whose receipt,” continued he, with great distinctness, “shall be considered a full discharge of all responsibility on the part of Lady Pargiter—you hold that receipt, of course, my lady?”

For the moment he thought she would have struck him, and drew back mechanically. As she stretched out her long scraggy neck, and beaked face, with its purple flush, it reminded him of some angry vulture in the Zoological Gardens. “You scoundrel!” she shrieked; “you thief!”

“Ah, you have not got it, then,” said Mr. Signet, his triumph overpowering his fears. “If you had, it would have been no matter. I have the cabman’s evidence that my agent remained here, and your own disproved falsehood about sending your footman after him, to back it. I should therefore have declined to pay forfeit to you in any case; but now—now that I know you have not got the receipt—I will never pay you one penny. You want your legal rights, do you? you shall have them; try them, claim them, push them—and see what comes of it!”

If Lady Pargiter looked like a vulture, it should be added in fairness that her antagonist resembled a cockatoo: every word he uttered was delivered with a jerk of his head and body, to signify at once

both victory and defiance. There was little wanting, in fact, to his similitude to the bird except the crest, and this he in part supplied by clapping his hat on in her ladyship's presence, and toddling rapidly from the room.

Not, however, before Lady Pargiter's voice reached him, laden with menace as well as reproaches.

"Cheat, thief, liar!" she cried, "you have suborned my waiting-maid; but it shall not avail you. To-morrow—see what I will do to-morrow; look in the paper to-morrow morning, Mr. Signet." And then again came her "Cheat, thief, liar!" like the refrain of some cadger's song in a new "Beggars' Opera."

CHAPTER VII.

TROUBLE IN THE MEWS.

NEXT to his friends in Cavendish Grove, there was no one in all London cognisant of Matthew Helston's disappearance—and who, by this time, but was aware of it?—who was half so much distressed by it as Mrs. Rutherford of Hybla Mews. She was grieved upon the missing man's account, distressed beyond measure upon that of his wife, and anxious and worried and indignant upon that of her husband. She was confident that he was as innocent of complicity with any crime—and especially one that had Matthew Helston for its victim—as one of his own cab-horses, but she could not

conceal from herself that the circumstances of the case threw suspicion upon him. She admitted in her own mind that not only the visits paid to them by Miss Thurlow and Mr. Signet were only what might have been looked for, but that that even of Mr. Brail had been justified. This had not been her husband's view. In spite of the detective's earnest and confidential tone, honest John had known him to be a policeman—"spotted him," as he had expressed it—at the first glance; and he had shown himself curt, not to say antagonistic, accordingly. It is one of the peculiarities of his class, when unjustly submitted to the examination of the civil power, to be so, and his morose behaviour had impressed Mr. Brail in his favour much more than if he had been fawning or even civil. Moreover, he had stuck precisely to the same tale throughout, which also worked in his favour, though cautious Mr. Brail by no means considered this conclusive. "It might be or it mightn't," he said; "some folks blush because they're innocent, and others because they're guilty; some look you in the face because they have nothing to fear, and others because they're 'owdacious.' And just in the same way some will stick to the same tale because it's true, and others because they have learnt it by heart—and when it was so, the shorter it was the better." If John Rutherford had learnt his story by heart, he had learnt it very well. The hour he reached Moor Street with his fare; the hour he departed from it without him; the distance, as he judged, he had

gone down the street before he was run after and recalled by "Six-foot"; the space of time (a very short one) that had elapsed between Matthew's leaving the cab the usual time, and the message brought to him that his fare had been asked to stay, and the words of the message—all this never varied with him. "It is the simple truth," he would generally add, in a quiet, natural manner, which, when wearied by questioners (for everybody was curious to hear his story), he would supplement in this way: "But if you don't choose to believe it, you may let it alone." To the wife of his bosom he had said again and again, "They may put me in prison, Sally, or they may cut my head off; but they won't get nothing more out of me." And to her mind his words had carried conviction. But simple as she was, and ignorant of the ways of the great world, she knew more about those of ordinary life than Lady Pargiter; from the moment that Amy came with her sad news, she felt that Mr. Matthew Helston's case—especially as it included the Pargiter diamonds—was an egg to be hatched, if hatched at all, by a sitting magistrate; and that the person in whose company Mr. Helston had last been seen would be the person held responsible for his recovery.

Honest John, on the other hand, having given his testimony and expressed his willingness to give it again, appeared to feel no apprehensions on his own account, and ignored, or affected to ignore, all further responsibility. He was sorry, he said, very sorry, for Master Matthew, and most sincerely hoped

all would turn out to be well with him; but if it were not well, he seemed to see no reason why it should be ill with himself. He went about his work as usual, and as if nothing had happened. Sally's love, however, quickened her fears, and made her observant. She saw that the cloud which hung over the missing man threw the shadow of suspicion, in their neighbours' eyes, over her husband, and that, though his society was much sought after in the Mews, and especially at the "Rising Sun," it was not out of friendship, but from a morbid curiosity. They liked to hear the details of his story, but especially from his own lips, because they felt he could tell so much more if he chose. This made her sad and very indignant, but not so much so as to forget the case of her good friend Mrs. Helston, who had so much more cause for sorrow—and indeed for indignation too—than she. The cabman's wife had a kind disposition and a mind not altogether uncultivated, and though she had been a domestic servant, she took none of that pleasure in family catastrophes which is an attribute—though by no means a peculiar one—of her class. For the first few days she had "not the heart" to go to poor "Miss Sabey that was," and condole with her upon her great calamity; she had hoped, every hour, that something would occur to clear up the mystery of Mr. Helston's absence, and to absolve her from so unpleasant an errand; but she now began to feel that this duty was incumbent on her, and ought to be no longer delayed.

On the afternoon of Mr. Signet's visit to Moor

Street she accordingly walked over to Cavendish Grove, and was received by Amy very kindly.

"Whether my sister will feel able to see you or not, I cannot say, Mrs. Rutherford. In any case, I am sure she will take your coming as very kind."

"Don't speak of that, Miss Amy: of course I understand what my presence must remind her of; and if it's better not——"

"No, it is not that, Sally. There is no fear of reminding my poor sister of what never escapes her recollection even for an instant. But, she may not feel equal to it."

"I would not overtask her strength for worlds," returned Sally gravely; "if that is your real reason, it is sufficient for me. But you was never good at deceiving folks, Miss Amy: you could allus easier say 'No,' however it grieved you, and I do think you have some other objection in your mind. Perhaps Mrs. Helston thinks — God forgive her if it be so—that my John has some hand in her present calamity?"

"Heaven forbid!" replied Amy earnestly: "no, pray don't think that, Sally." Her hesitation had been caused, not indeed exactly as Mrs. Rutherford suggested, but by the opinions she had heard Frank express respecting the cabman; she herself believed in his innocence, but if her lover should happen to be right, how dreadful it would be for her sister to see this woman!

In the end she left the decision to Sabey herself, who was aware of Mr. Barlow's views. "Of

course I will see Sally," was her sister's reply; and the interview took place accordingly.

At the sight of Mrs. Helston, so white and wan, and "with all the life taken out of her," as her visitor afterwards expressed it, Mrs. Rutherford burst into tears.

"Don't cry, Sally," said Sabey, putting up her thin cheek to the other's kiss; "though indeed I wish I could weep as you do."

"Indeed, Miss Sabey, I wish you could; for it always does one a power of good. And yet it is a good sign in your case, for if you thought Mr. Helston were really gone from you for ever, your tears would come quick enough."

Sabey shook her head: she did think he was gone for ever, but she could not be sure.

"What a kind gentleman he was," continued the good woman; "and how considerate! John says he never drove a fare like him: with always a pleasant word, or a bit of bacca, or a drop of good drink on a cold night. Even if it hadn't been Master Matthew, as he had known from a child, he'd 'a' took to him, he says, as he never took to anyone else."

"If my husband missed his opportunities as people say," said Sabey, as if speaking to herself, "it was not those which were offered to him of doing a kindness to his fellow-creatures."

"That is very true, ma'am; he could never hurt a fly; and to think that anybody would have done harm to him for the sake of them rubbishy diamonds, is almost past belief."

"There are very wicked people in the world, I fear," said Amy.

"Yes, and some as has no call to it, as you may say, ma'am: folks out of the reach of temptation, like Lady Pargiter."

"Let us speak ill of no one without proof," said Sabey solemnly. She had not, as we know, been wont to spare her ladyship, for had not her Matthew had good cause for disliking her? but of late Sabey had altered in this respect: if her husband were dead, it seemed a want of reverence to his memory to keep alive anything (such as a prejudice or animosity) that might now appear to eyes from which the scales had fallen an unworthiness. Moreover, Sabey, who had thought the whole matter out a hundred times, did not believe in Lady Pargiter's guilt; and was it not her duty to reprove slander, which was even now flickering with its forked tongue against her own dearest and nearest!

"I don't know about proof," said Mrs. Rutherford: "but the mistress of them in whose company he was seen last—and they were Lady Pargiter's servants—ought to know more about what has become of your poor husband than anyone else."

There was no answer. Amy kept her eyes upon the ground, and Sabey was looking straight before her in semi-unconsciousness of her visitor's presence. To her the woman's words, though they had a direct reference to her bereavement, scarcely reached her sense: she was like one who, full of thought and years, listens to the voice of some young pulpiteer preaching upon "Fate, Freewill, Foreknowledge ab-

solute;" the topic is important, but from him no new light is likely to be shed upon it.

"You think my John a liar?" said Mrs. Rutherford suddenly.

"Indeed, Sally, we don't say that," observed Amy gently.

"But you think it, and Mrs. Helston thinks it."

"The night was dark," said Sabey, with grave distinctness, like a judge who is giving his charge to a jury; "the snow was falling and the wind was blowing. Your husband was tired, no doubt; his senses were not so keen as under other circumstances; and he may have been mistaken as to what was said to him by the footman regarding my dear husband."

"It was not so, Miss Sabey; indeed it was not so. John had his senses about him quite as usual, and he had taken no liquor. However, as you say, he may have been mistaken; but oh, my dear young ladies, he was not misguided. You have said just now that we should speak ill of no one without proof: but is it not as wrong to *think* ill of them? You are woe-stricken, dear Miss Sabey, and hardly answerable, perhaps, for the thoughts which sorrow has put into your heart: I forgive you them whatever they be. But do not think, I pray you do not think, that my John is to blame in this matter. His heart is as sound, ma'am, as your poor husband's is; and though he has done fewer kindnesses to others, he is mindful of those which have been done to him. If I thought that John, my John, could so far

forget whose wife it was who came to me in the fever as to lift his hand——”

“Sally, Sally, we don’t think it,” expostulated Amy, for the woman had thrown herself upon her knees, in a passion of mingled repudiation and appeal.

“You do—*she* does!” cried Sally. “She thinks my husband has robbed, perhaps murdered, his friend and benefactor. If I thought so, so help me Heaven, I would give him up to the hangman with my own hands.”

“Sally—Sally—forgive me,” faltered Sabey, rising from her chair, and holding out her arms for her embrace. “If I have done your husband wrong in thought—and perhaps I have—I humbly ask your pardon. The best, the most honest of us (alas! I know it) do not, where all is dark, escape suspicion. I know, as well as He who made him, that my Matthew is as pure as snow from the least stain upon his honour. I loathe, despise, abhor those who dare to hint otherwise. Then, why should I deny to you the faith that I hold so firmly in my own case? I do not deny it, Sally. I believe your husband to be innocent of all complicity in this matter; that he has had no hand whatever in breaking this poor heart.”

“The Lord Almighty bless you and comfort you, Miss Sabey, for saying those blessed words,” sobbed the good woman. “Oh, how glad I am I came to you!”

It was strange to see—and might have been a lesson to the most melancholy—what joy had been

imparted to this good woman by poor Sabey, who herself was absolutely joyless.

Mrs. Rutherford returned home that afternoon a far happier woman, for it had weighed heavily on her mind that Mrs. Helston might entertain bitter thoughts of her John. All she had said in his defence to her had been genuine and honest. Only, in order to introduce the subject, she had spoken out more plainly against Lady Pargiter—and had been very properly reproved for it—than she had been justified in doing; for in her heart of hearts she did not believe that her ladyship had had any hand in the matter. Her husband thought otherwise, it was true, and his evidence, in which she believed in every particular, tended that way, no doubt; but she herself felt that there must be some mistake. Her ladyship's servants—some of those good-for-nothing "Six-feet"—might have done the mischief among themselves; but she could not believe that Lady Pargiter had stolen her own diamonds.

That other persons, such as Captain Langton, had had their eye upon them, she was satisfied, and on them her suspicions would have rested, but for the fact that it was under Lady Pargiter's roof that Matthew was left by her husband, and that out of Lady Pargiter's doors he had never since been seen to pass.

On her returning home, she was disappointed at finding that John had not yet returned, for she longed to tell him that she had been to Cavendish Grove, and made his peace for him with Mrs.

Helston; in her state of mental excitement, she found she could not sit down as usual to her needlework; her thoughts were always straying to the poor forlorn young lady she had just left, and to the mysterious calamity that had befallen her. "I can't stand this," she murmured to herself at last; "I shall go mad, if I keep thinking about it, without a soul to talk to. I'll just run up and down the walls, and put things straight."

To an ordinary intelligence her expressed intention of "running up and down the walls" would have sounded as if Mrs. Rutherford were mad already; but it was a common term of hers for clearing out the premises and making them tidy: which occupation had such a charm for her (as it has with all good housewives) that when engaged in it she had no thoughts for anything else. She did not possess that blessing to housemaids a Turk's-head broom, nor even a pair of steps, but mounting on a chair, she began to use a handbrush in a very workmanlike style. The room was low, so that even the ceiling was within reach of her ministrations: and very soon, not a cobweb nor a speck of dust was to be seen. She was just giving a finishing touch to the top of their common wardrobe, which was however out of sight, when her brush knocked against some metallic substance. "Lawk a mercy, why, what's that?" cried Sally. She put up her hand with no little curiosity, and from the receptacle in question, where it had evidently been placed for the purpose of concealment, she brought out a large pistol. Amazement and alarm were at first her only

feelings: she had a belief in the danger of firearms which unhappily is not always found coexistent with an ignorance of their use, and she laid the weapon upon the table, taking care to point the muzzle away from her, as though it had been a self-acting Infernal Machine. When it showed no signs of going off, her personal apprehensions subsided, but only to be replaced by fears of another kind. How on earth had her husband come to be possessed of such an instrument? What did a cabman want with a pistol? Even if she had known it was a horse-pistol, it would have been no answer to such a question; as it was, there was not a trace of association between them. It had felt so heavy that she was convinced that it was loaded; but, loaded or not, what business had her John to own it? That it was his she had no doubt; for she had known him to use the top of the wardrobe before for purposes, as he flattered himself, of concealment; being under the impression that her brush did not invade that dust-covered but elevated region. Now, with pistols Sally was always accustomed to associate crimes of violence: and had not such a crime been in all probability committed upon Mr. Matthew Helston? The inference was only too obvious. She did not even now think her husband guilty of an offence so heinous, but she did not feel that certainty of his innocence which she had entertained five minutes ago. Suppose the police had been sent by Mr. Brail or Mr. Signet to search the room? If she had not found the pistol, most certainly they would have done so, and drawn the worst deduction

from it. The very idea of such a thing made her stout limbs quake with fear. Her first thought was how to get rid of it, or at all events to place it in some more secret spot. She thought for a moment of putting it into the fire, but, fortunately for her nerves, gave up that plan; she reflected that iron did not easily melt. Then another element suggested itself, which would hide the thing equally well, and also have the advantage of quenching its powers for ill. With infinite caution, she lifted the pistol, as she afterwards described it, "by the ears"—it was fortunately at half-cock, or the hammers might have resented this treatment—and stepping into the verandah, dropped it gently into the water-butt below.

Then she awaited the return of her husband, with anxiety indeed and misgivings, but with somewhat less of immediate alarm. The good news she had had to give him had vanished: it was no longer in her mind; and what sort of news, she wondered, would John, under compulsion, have to give her? That he had concealed something from her, besides the pistol, was certain: the only question now was, How much? or How bad?

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER DESERTER.

It has been cruelly and falsely said (generally in excuse for some harsh conduct or neglect upon our own parts towards them) that the poor do not

feel so acutely as their betters; that domestic calamities fall lighter on them; and that even disease does not wring them with such pain as it causes more tenderly nurtured bodies. The explanation for this fallacy probably lies in the fact that their troubles are so severe that ordinary woes seem by comparison insignificant to them; a toothache that makes *us* doubt the benevolence of the scheme of creation is to them a toothache and nothing more; and happy are they if they possess the shilling that absolves them from the kind offices of an amateur tooth-drawer; while to the rheumatism whose pangs we resent so bitterly, the field labourer's back is bowed in patient acquiescence, as to an ill to which his class is heir. On the other hand, it is certain that the poor are not easily affected by mental anxiety: a fortunate thing for those whose livelihood so often depends on the caprice of a master. The carelessness with which the domestic servant will leave her "place," the readiness with which the workman will throw up his employment, and trust to the chapter of accidents for a new situation, are marvellous. Risks do not appal them; misfortune, as a rule, throws no shadow upon them until it is actually at their doors.

Hence it was that, though Mr. John Rutherford could not but be aware that he was looked upon with public suspicion in reference to Mr. Helston's disappearance and the missing diamonds, and might any day find himself in "Queer Street" in consequence, the circumstance did not much disturb his equanimity. Nor was he so much distressed

upon Master Matthew's account as his wife would have preferred to see him.

"*He*'ll come out of it all right, sooner or later, old woman," he was wont to reply to Sally's often expressed fears; and this confidence on his part had been wont to afford her some consolation. What she had understood him to mean was that though, in his view, Lady Pargiter had put Matthew out of the way for the time, in order to dispose of the jewels in security, she was by no means likely to proceed to the last extremity and murder him.

But when her husband returned that evening, after her discovery of the pistol, and as usual in very tolerable spirits, all her former surmises were put to the rout. She felt comfort in nothing, and sure of nothing except that his lively whistling gave her extreme annoyance, for it seemed to her a sign of callousness.

"You are very gay, John," she said with significance, "but if you had been with me to-day, and seen how poor Mrs. Helston was looking, it would have sobered you."

"Sobered me?" returned her husband; "so help me Bob, I have touched nothing but beer—and only a pint of that—the lifelong day."

"Oh, I don't mean drink; and it's my belief you know well enough that I don't, John; it's your reckless devil-may-care way of going on that shocks *me*."

"Well, you mentioned drink, Sally," replied the cabman, to all appearance in genuine astonishment, "and hang me if I don't think you've been at the

gin-bottle. Because Master Matthew has been kidnapped (for that's what's happened, I'll bet a shiner), and his missus is naturally cut up about it, is it therefore a sin for me to whistle?"

"The sin ain't in the whistling," replied his lady darkly. "A man sometimes whistles to hide the remorse as is a-gnawing of him."

"Annoying of him?" replied honest John, for whom this eloquence was too highflying. "To my mind, it's a deuced sight more annoying than whistling to find black looks and an empty supper-table when you come home after a hard day's work."

"You shall have your supper, John, directly," said Sally, somewhat moved by this reproof; albeit it was the first time she had forgotten to prepare her husband's meal for him, for many a day; "though, for my part, I wonder at some persons possessing an appetite, with such a weight upon their minds."

"A weight? One would really suppose I had got Mr. Matthew Helston in my pocket," exclaimed John, looking round on space appealingly.

"I don't know *what* you've got in your pocket, not I," returned Mrs. Rutherford, fixing him with her eye; "perhaps another loaded pistol."

John's face did not easily turn colour—exposure to the weather and pretty liberal potations having made it tolerably "fast"—but through its ordinary hue of blue and red "came a colour and a light, as I've seen the rosy red blushing in the northern night;" and at the same time his glance mechanically wandered to the top of the wardrobe.

"Oh yes: that's where it was," cried Sally sardo-

nically; "and it's no use denying that you put it there. May I ask you, John Rutherford, what an honest cabman can want of loaded pistols?"

Notwithstanding that he was by nature somewhat garrulous, Mr. Rutherford kept silence for some moments; he scratched his huge and tangled head, his great body swayed from side to side in mental perturbation, and after all there came this *ridiculus mus* of a reply—

"You may ask, of course. There's no law agin asking, as I'm aweer on; but as to answering—well, I shan't, and that's flat."

"You'll tell me, at all events, whether I've got a murderer for my husband?" inquired Sally, with solemnity.

"Well, not at present—no, you ain't," replied John; "though if you go on in that aggravating way," he added with irritation, "there's no knowing what you may drive me to."

"It's conscience as is driving you, not me, and has got the whip-hand of you," replied Sally. "You may try to drown it in liquor——"

"A pint of beer," interrupted John contemptuously.

"Or you may glaze it over with whistling and such like," continued his lady; "but your sin will find you out, John. To think that an honest man, as you once were, should have come to such a pass as to want loaded pistols!"

"Where is it?" inquired John, in dictatorial tones.

"Where you won't find it," replied Sally defiantly; "where the police won't find it, neither, I hope; for if they did, what would become of you, a

man as they suspect already? Never will I sleep by your side agin, John, unless you tell me what you wanted with that pistol."

"Then you must lie on the floor, Sally, for I never will."

She knew by his tone that obstinacy had set in with him, and that all direct attempts to move him would be futile. If John had been a Cabinet Minister instead of a cabman, he would have been justly celebrated for an inflexible determination; as it was, he had the more humble reputation of being the most pigheaded man in Hybla Mews.

"Don't let's quarrel, John," said Sally humbly. "Whatever you've done, it is my duty to stick by you; but I think a wife—and a good one, such as I have been to you——"

He nodded with the gravity of a judge: so far the Court was with her.

"I think, I say, I have a right to your confidence. As it is, I don't even know how to defend you. Do you think I walked to Cavendish Grove to-day and back only to comfort poor dear Miss Sabey as was? No, John; it was also to clear your character in her eyes. And I thank Heaven I did it. 'Do you think my John,' says I, 'would have knowingly done any harm to Master Matthew?'"

"That was right enough," said John approvingly.

"Yes; but how can I feel that it was right enough *now*? How can I lay my hand upon my heart, and say—'My husband is as innocent as the babe unborn,' when I know he carries a loaded

pistol? Honest folks don't carry such things, but only thieves and murderers."

"Then it's a pity you found it," said John cunningly, and in a tone of satisfaction at his own logical acumen. "The less you knows the better you seems to manage. I'm not agoing to tell you why I bought that there pistol, Sally; but I will tell you this much for your comfort—the use of it, whatever it was, is dead and gone. You may keep it for yourself—to shoot the beetles with—for all I care."

"I keep it! I wouldn't have such a thing in *my* house, far less my hand—for its weight in gold. I've thrown it into the water-butt."

"Don't you think it'll give rather a taste to the tea?" suggested Mr. Rutherford. "Iron, they say, is strengthening to the system; but I am not so sure about powder and lead."

"Then it *was* loaded, John?" said Sally despondingly.

"Well, yes, it was; but I'll say this much—and mind you, it's the very last I *will* say—that pistol was not meant to do any harm to Master Matthew. Quite the contrary."

"I thank Heaven for that, John!" exclaimed Sally with genuine satisfaction. But the next moment her brow became clouded. She wished to ask him a certain question which she could not muster courage to put into words.

"I think you had better fish that pistol out," he said suddenly, "and then throw it away somewhere. As you say, if the Police found it, it might bring someone into trouble."

Sally did not ask who the someone was, but instantly took up the tongs and went out on the verandah. The night had fallen by that time, and no one standing in the Mews could have seen what she was about. Nevertheless, there was a star or two, the light of which was sufficient to indicate the surface of the water—only it did not do so. Sally knew, however, where to find the butt; and, kneeling on the wooden gallery, thrust down the tongs in the direction of it. But they only struck against its wooden walls.

"Why, the water has leaked out, John," she whispered in a frightened tone. "That's a strange thing."

"It would be much stranger if the pistol had flowed through the spigot," answered John, with the air of one who understands practical science. "There's a ladder agen the butt below——" But Sally had already run downstairs to carry out the suggested plan. She was longer away than could be accounted for by the nature of her errand, and when she came back her look of alarm had turned to one of positive terror.

"The pistol's gone, John!"

"What d'ye mean?" he said. "Gone off of itself, and in a butt of water!"

"No; the spigot's out. Some one has drawed off the water, and taken away the pistol."

"Whew!" Though written as a monosyllable, this word was prolonged in Mr. Rutherford's lips to a quite extraordinary extent, and his face wore a very serious expression as he uttered it. "The Perleec

have been at their little games," he murmured. "Well, let 'em. He must be out of harm's way by this time."

"*Who* must be out of harm's way?" inquired Sally quickly.

"Never you mind," he answered gruffly; "you've meddled enough already for one day. If you hadn't found that there pistol the Perleece would not have found it. Can't you leave things alone? Let's have supper, will you. If you say another word about the pistol or Master Matthew, I'm off to the 'Rising Sun.'"

There was nothing Mrs. Rutherford disliked more than her husband leaving her for the public-house; and just now, of all times, it was terrible to her to have him out of her sight: so she proceeded to lay the supper-table without a word. She now felt certain that he had compromised himself in the Moor Street affair, but no longer feared that he had done harm to Mr. Helston. He had said that that pistol was bought, not to harm him, but "quite the contrary." Now, "quite the contrary" could only mean to help him—to further some scheme of Mr. Helston's own. Moreover, to whom could he have referred but to Mr. Helston when he had muttered to himself—"He must be out of harm's way by this time"? Her husband was no murderer, and perhaps no thief in any personal sense; but she knew how strong were his likes and dislikes—his notions of sticking to his friends, and never betraying them; and in spite of herself she now entertained a dread-

ful apprehension that he had been playing into his friend and employer's hands.

And thus of the faithful few that still believed in Matthew Helston's innocence as respected the Pargiter diamonds, one more had gone over—if not to the Enemy, to the Majority.

CHAPTER IX.

THE POSTHUMOUS LETTER.

READER, has it ever fallen to your duty to open the desk of one very dear to you, and who is dead, and to suffer anew the parting with him at the sight of every "trivial fond record"? There is scarcely one of all the sad experiences to which human nature is heir, more pathetic, more heart-breaking. His handwriting lies before you, with his thoughts still living in it, though the fingers that set them down are cold in death. Here is a faded flower, memorial of you know not what, but doubtless of some tender time; its blossom has withered, its stalk is dry, but it has not yet become dust as he has. There are letters from others, tied round with loving care, and doubtless intended to be read again by eyes to whom the page of Futurity alone is now open. Perhaps one of your own letters is among them—let us hope a kind one—how strangely has it altered to your view; it is no longer a mere vehicle of your own feelings, but has become a material link with the other world!

On such a bitter task, on Friday, December 18, exactly one week after her husband's disappearance, Mrs. Helston was engaged. She was not certain, it is true, that her Matthew was dead; she wore no outward mark of the widow about her—save in the wan cheek and the hollow eye—but her heart was almost as hopeless and forlorn as though she had been one. She had undertaken this sad office under the combined advice of Uncle Stephen and Mr. Barlow; not that they expected ought to come of it, but because it was just possible—in the absence of all other explanations of the enigma—that some clue to the mystery of her husband's absence might be discovered among his own documents. The very suggestion, as they were well aware, had the elements of suspicion or disparagement about it; but that, as they foresaw, never entered into Sabey's mind. They had put it to her in this way:—"It is possible, just possible, that Matthew has come to harm at the hand of some private enemy. So far as we know, it is true, he had none; nay, he himself may have been unaware of the existence of such a person, and yet it may be otherwise. We think that every private paper should be examined which may throw the least light upon his relations with other people.

At first Sabey showed great unwillingness to accede to this proposal. It seemed to her irreverent, she said, thus to pry into her lost husband's private affairs, but her real reason was that the fact of her so doing seemed a tacit admission that he was lost to her for ever; it could affect the fact, of course,

neither one way nor the other; but the feeling may well be excused, when we consider how many matter-of-fact and otherwise sensible persons object to make their wills. In the end, however, as we have said, she consented. One of the reasons that had weighed with her, in addition to the chief one, had been a certain argument of Mr. Barlow's:—

"In your case," he had said, "dear Sabey, there need be no apprehension of any record coming to light to pain you. Matthew's life was stainless."

His use of the past tense made her lips quiver, but she only bowed her head. Of course Matthew's life had been stainless; but, if she refused to do their bidding, they might think perhaps that she entertained suspicions to the contrary: an idea that would certainly not have entered her head a week ago; but now, with all the newspapers, and the world that read them, imputing evil to her husband, she had become sensitively jealous for his honour.

Matthew's desk was characteristic of its owner: a plain ink-stained affair with no conveniences within it such as shelves and drawers, but fastened by a good lock of his own making; the very taking of the key from its bunch was a sore trial to her, and, before putting it to its use, she cleaned it with a piece of leather—lest it should be rusted with her tears, she said to herself—but in reality to gain time. The contents of the desk were also characteristic. They consisted almost entirely of mathematical calculations; row after row of figures, the meaning of which was utterly unknown to her, but which she guessed rightly, had reference to "Madge." They were

beautifully written out, and every paper appeared to be arranged with reference to the others. But, dear as had been his hopes in that direction, his heart—or at least the core of it—had lain elsewhere. Every letter—they were not many—she had ever written to him was found there, tied up in two packets. In one were those she had addressed to him as her lover, and dated from the Rectory; in the other the few she had had occasion, since their marriage, to write to him in Paulet Street—for they had never been separated by any longer distance.

"From dearest Sabey," was inscribed on the former; and on the latter, "From my darling wife." It was terrible that the assurance of Love should inflict such cruel pangs. She opened one or two of them: they had not, of course, the power to move her as Matthew's own letters—sacred relics, stored in her own chamber, which she had not had the courage to touch—would have done; but nevertheless, in recalling the happy past, they shot sharp arrows into her heart. There was also a memorandum of the sums that had been expended by Mr. Durham in the promotion of Madge's interests, and a letter bound up with them by a plain india-rubber band, but sealed, addressed "For Uncle Stephen, in case anything should happen to me."

A strange addition under the circumstances enough, but which did not strike Sabey with much significance. She knew how deeply Matthew had felt his uncle's kindness, and she could easily conceive that gratitude had caused him to make this simple proviso for expressing itself to the good old

man, in case opportunity should be otherwise denied him: the letter probably also bequeathed his wife and child to his uncle's care, albeit that might have seemed superfluous. To one who had known Matthew Helston less thoroughly, his leaving such a document behind him would have looked like a morbid presentiment of death, but to Sabey the incident was easily accountable.

Matthew had a horror of "risks:" because Fortune perhaps had gone so ill with him, he had an objection to leave anything to chance; nor would he trust to the most natural contingencies, if it was possible for him to make a thing secure without them. And, moreover, he was always looking to the future. It was therefore without any foreboding as to its contents that Sabey took the letter from its receptacle, and, having wiped her tears, carried it into the next room, where Amy and Mr. Durham were sitting.

"Well, darling?" inquired the former, tenderly; she had left her sister alone with her sad task from motives of delicacy, but she read in her face how she had suffered in the ordeal. "Have you found anything?"

Sabey shook her head. "Only what I knew I should find. There is, however, this note for you, Uncle Stephen."

"For me?" said the old man, reading the superscription: "*For Uncle Stephen, in case anything should happen to me.*"

"How strange!" exclaimed Amy, with excitement.

Mr. Durham was excited too, and being aware of the fact, he purposely delayed to open the envelope. He felt that presence of mind was necessary in case anything had to be concealed from Sabey.

"I can guess its contents," said she softly. "Matthew wishes to express to you in writing the thanks you would never listen to from his lips. The note was wrapped up with some memoranda of his money obligations to you. These he might have paid, had the chance been given him: his debt of gratitude never."

"Poor fellow, dear fellow!" murmured Uncle Stephen. "Yes; it is as you say. To his generous nature every little kindness loomed so large."

Sabey could read what had been written to her husband's disparagement: such things turned her heart to steel. But she could not bear to hear him praised: that melted it. With a deep sob, she hurried from the room.

Amy was too wise to follow her immediately; and besides, something in the old man's manner had attracted her attention.

"Can I see that letter, Mr. Durham?"

"I had rather not show it you, my dear," he answered quietly.

"If it really only contains dear Matthew's expression of his gratitude to you, I can picture it for myself. I know how he loved you."

"It does contain something else, Amy. But it is only a matter of business."

Then Amy gathered up her work, and withdrew to comfort Sabey.

Left alone, Mr. Durham took the letter from his pocket, and re-read it very carefully:—

“My dear Uncle Stephen,” it began,—“In case I should not live so long as the Tables of the *Phoenix*” [this was his life assurance company] “have calculated, and you should survive me, I wish to add one more item to the long debt of gratitude I owe you. The sense of obligation, like other senses, is, I suppose, blunted by long use, or surely I should feel ashamed at asking any further favour of you. That the service I am about to ask of you must be a secret one—even from my wife, and indeed especially from her—will be an additional reason for your undertaking it; it is your delight, I know, to let your right hand know not what your left hand does for others; the matter is also one of great delicacy, which will further recommend it to your noble nature. When I add that I entreat this kindness of you with my last breath, I feel that I need say no more.

“Please to pay to Lucy Mortlock, a young woman at present residing at 80 Bleak Street, Bloomsbury the sum of 10*s. weekly*, and if possible ensure the continuance of this allowance after your death. have only one other favour to ask of you; that, for my sake, you will not seek to inquire into her story—I am, dear Uncle Stephen, your loving and grateful nephew,

“MATTHEW HELSTON.”

CHAPTER X.

TWO VIEWS.

It was very seldom that Uncle Stephen's face, albeit far from a cynical one, wholly lost that expression of philosophical calm which old age and a long consciousness of the possession of superior intelligence combine to bestow. But, after perusing this strange bequest of Matthew Helston's, it exhibited every sign of perturbation and dismay. Stiff as he was in his limbs, he seemed unable to consider the matter sitting quietly in his armchair, but paced the room with unequal steps, muttering to himself disconsolately. On hearing Mr. Barlow come into the hall, however, he moved quickly to the door, and beckoned him in.

"Can you give me a few minutes quite alone?" he said. "Something has occurred of moment, I think. Amy must not be present."

"Mary was at the door as I came up, so I did not ring the bell," returned Mr. Barlow; "the ladies do not know that I am in the house."

"That is well. Let us come down to the smoking-room, however, where we shall run no chance of being disturbed."

"What has happened now?" inquired the lawyer, astonished at these unprecedented precautions. "No new trouble, I do hope?"

"Yes, a new one, or at least one that is new to us," answered Mr. Durham significantly. "When

poor Sabey was turning out her husband's desk this morning she found this letter addressed to me in his handwriting."

"*'If anything should happen to me,'*" continued Mr. Barlow, reading from the envelope; "such a superscription is noteworthy indeed."

"You think it shows danger," said Mr. Durham, unconsciously gnawing his beard, "or at least the knowledge that something was likely to happen?"

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Barlow.

"That did not strike me," returned the old man. "If you are right, it only makes things look more black. Read it, read it."

Mr. Barlow read the letter slowly and carefully, then stood with it in his hand, evidently in deep thought.

"It has no date," observed Mr. Durham; "that seems to me against your argument of design."

"It is so," admitted the lawyer.

"Still, you think, perhaps, that consciousness of exposure to temptation, and of his own weakness, might have caused him to make preparations for the worst."

"Good heavens! Mr. Durham, do you suppose that Matthew was carrying on some secret intrigue?"

"What other explanation can you put upon it? The service he asks of me must, he says, be a secret one—I should not be now speaking of it to you, of course, Mr. Barlow, but for the sad circumstances in which we are placed—"*secret even from my wife, and indeed especially from her.*" What

other meaning can such an expression wear save that I have put upon it? Again, "*I have only one other favour to ask of you: that, for my sake, you will not seek to inquire into this woman's story.*" A phrase that seems to me even more pregnant than the other."

"Of course it is suspicious, Mr. Durham; or rather, I grant the circumstances would be so in the case of most men. You are Helston's uncle, and should know him best."

"I do know him as far as one man may know his fellow; and you surely don't suppose, sir, that I wish to be hard upon Matthew?"

"Of course not, Mr. Durham. I think, however, your judgment is here at fault."

"And, as you would add, on the side of harshness," observed the old man bitterly. "This is what comes of length of days."

To Mr. Barlow this was one of those observations of Mr. Durham's of which he was wont very frankly to aver that he could neither make head nor tail. The abstract—unless in the form of a legal document—was not at all in his line. It was on the concrete only—unlike the cab-horses—that he felt on firm ground.

"You have never heard any mention of this Lucy Mortlock?" he said presently.

"I?" exclaimed Mr. Durham with irritation; "how should I have heard? Am I the sort of person—even if I were not his uncle—to whom Matthew would talk upon such a subject? He had probably never opened his lips about her to anyone."

"Really, Mr. Durham, you attribute to your nephew very bad behaviour, upon what, as it seems to me, are very insufficient grounds. Matthew was reserved, no doubt, but scarcely what I should call secretive: conceive the deep and continuous duplicity that such an intrigue would have demanded of him?"

"I don't wish to conceive it, Mr. Barlow," returned the old man with emotion. "To dwell upon the matter at all is odious to me; but I cannot shut my eyes to probabilities. If we were concerning ourselves with anything but a woman, I could go three miles for your one (or for any man's) on the road to show Matthew's innocence. But I cannot efface within me the experience of a lifetime; and it tells me that until a man is dead you can never be sure of his relations with the other sex. You will say, and with justice, that Matthew was the very last person to prove faithless to his wife, to carry on a system of domestic hypocrisy, to spend any portion of his scanty earnings upon an unworthy object—but, unhappily, it is these 'very last' men who are the first to do it. If it was so, poor fellow," added Uncle Stephen musingly, "there was reason enough for his absence of mind and wandering thoughts."

"If, however, your suggestion of yesterday is to be accepted, Mr. Durham," observed the lawyer, "poor Matthew was scarcely responsible for his actions."

"Let us hope so; let us hope so, Mr. Barlow.

And yet, great Heaven, what an alternative to be grateful for!"

"Well, for my part—and with all deference to your greater experience of life," said Mr. Barlow, after a long silence, "I see nothing in this letter which cannot be explained—I do not say satisfactorily—but in a less painful way. Matthew Helston's heart was a very kind one; and notwithstanding his habits of reserve, it was subject to impulse."

"That is to say," remarked Mr. Durham, with a gesture of impatience, "he was impressionable and affectionate; of such materials are formed the unwilling slaves of passion."

"But why should this not have been an affair of mere philanthropy? He has become acquainted, we know not how, with this girl, and pities her; she is exposed to poverty and all its ills, and he would fain place her out of the reach of temptation. A quixotic act, you may say——"

"I say an unjust one," broke in Mr. Durham; "he dares not speak of it to his wife, and naturally shrinks from encroaching upon his narrow means for such a purpose; but he asks another to be his almoner. It is an infatuation, of course, but one which stains his memory. Moreover, conceive the risk he ran in leaving such a letter where Sabey was sure to find it. What selfishness, what recklessness! Oh, Matt! how shameful!"

The old man threw himself into a chair, and beat his hands together in a manner distressing to behold.

"Well, sir, there is one comfort," said Mr. Bar-

low consolingly: "Mrs. Helston did not open the letter, and need never now be cognisant of its contents. Except so far as we are concerned, all this is as though it never had happened."

"Do you think matters are to end here, then?" inquired Mr. Durham.

"Indeed I hope so. You will surely not seek out this person?"

"Of course I shall. In any case, I must do that. You don't suppose I object to the money payment?—and if your explanation of the matter is a correct one, it will, of course, be paid. But is it possible you do not see to what this disclosure points—what an explanation it may afford of Matthew's disappearance—and that of the diamonds too—and one more trouble, worse to that poor woman above-stairs than even the catastrophe itself?"

"Upon my life, I don't see it yet," said Mr. Barlow, not without a touch of pique.

"And he is a lawyer!" murmured Mr. Durham in what he intended to be a soliloquy, but of which the other heard every word. "I have always said that their knowledge of human life is but parchment deep!—The unhappy conclusion borne in upon my mind, Mr. Barlow, is that this Lucy Mortlock is at the bottom of the whole calamity."

"Do you mean by that that Matthew has run away with her?"

"Heaven forgive me if I do him wrong," answered Mr. Durham solemnly, "but that is my belief."

"It is not mine," said Mr. Barlow sturdily.

It was curious to note the different mental attitudes of these two men upon a subject on which their natural sympathies were almost identical. Indeed, Mr. Durham, who took the dark view of the probabilities of the case, was undoubtedly the one more favourable to Matthew. A student of human nature (although one who had observed it mostly from without), he was driven to his conviction in spite of himself; whereas Barlow, who was not wont to be Matthew's apologist, now took his side. A type—though a good specimen of it—of conventional middle-class life, vice was comparatively foreign to his experience, whereas crime—that is, all the devices of self-aggrandisement—was familiar to him. He could have conceived Matthew absconding with the diamonds for their own sake much more easily than Mr. Durham could have done. But the introduction of a young person of the opposite sex into the problem of the missing man did not greatly influence his calculations. He was one of those "eminently respectable" persons who hardly exist, and certainly do not "flourish," except among the English middle classes, and in his heart of hearts would have deemed Matthew's infidelity to his wife less excusable than felony.

If there was one class of his fellow-creatures whom Mr. Durham secretly despised more than another, it was that to which Mr. Barlow belonged. They seemed to him to be narrow, ignorant, and bigoted; to have their minds fixed on sordid objects, and to pursue them in an uninteresting way. Yet, so far as his own conduct went, he might have been

an elder of a chapel at Clapham; and indeed he had been even less susceptible as regards the fair sex than some Elders.

There was, it is true, a rumour in certain scientific circles that Mr. Durham's admiration had once been excited, and very freely expressed, for a married woman—the wife of Professor Beeswing, the naturalist. But this was in reality quite a platonic affair. He had called on one occasion and found her sitting upon a lidless and empty box, from which she declined to move. "I cannot rise," she explained, "because the Professor has placed me here for a scientific purpose. This box has been sent to him from Upper Egypt, full of the rarest insects, and some of them have got into the wood; nothing but animal heat will get them out of it."

Mr. Durham was wont to discourse with rapture on this heroic woman, who had thus devoted as much time and attention as a hen gives to her eggs to the cause of science, and could no more be induced to desert her post than Casabianca. But, albeit often rallied upon the subject, no softer feeling than admiration had in reality been aroused in his bosom. Though gentle and chivalrous in his behaviour to the fair sex, he had, in fact, even in his youth, had a wholesome fear of captivity at their hands; their fascinations being comparatively unknown to him, were perhaps magnified in his eyes in consequence; or it may be, like most men who live in books (since for the most part, only remarkable matters are recorded in them), he was always in expectation of the unexpected.

"However much I may differ from you upon this matter, Mr. Barlow," said Uncle Stephen very gently, "I am not, Heaven knows, arguing for victory; on the contrary, it will give me great content if the event proves you to be in the right."

"No doubt, no doubt, Mr. Durham. I understand, then, that you mean to go to Bleak Street and seek out this—this young person?"

"Most certainly I do, to-morrow evening. Unless, indeed, you prefer to take that responsibility off my shoulders. You are a man of business, and more accustomed to deal with practical matters; and it may well be——"

"Not at all, not at all," interrupted Mr. Barlow with some precipitation. "Your knowledge of human nature especially fits you to unravel a skein so delicate and—oh, dear me!—no, I had much rather leave the matter in your hands, Mr. Durham."

CHAPTER XI.

TWO LANDLADIES.

BLEAK STREET, Bloomsbury, is not an attractive spot, whether viewed from the side of the comfortable or of the picturesque. It is tolerably wide, but the houses are low and of mean exterior, and very dingy. At what periods the inhabitants covenant to paint their domiciles it is impossible to guess, but that some uniform date is assigned seems certain, since they are all in the same condition. As to

cleaning within-doors, there is such an unanimity among all the tenants upon that score as is almost affecting: by tacit consent they appear to have agreed never to do it. The thoroughfare is so far aristocratic that, though it has a large sprinkling of public-houses, it only possesses a few shops, which are all devoted to second-hand furniture. And in these shops dwell the brokers whose office it is to put in executions in the neighbourhood—which is a great convenience. The comparative breadth of the street, which is really not required for its very moderate traffic, is rather a temptation to throw things into it which are elsewhere generally kept out of sight till the dustman calls for them. In summer this practice has its drawbacks, but in winter a layer of mud conceals all these objectionable objects; while a fall of snow will—for an hour or two—even lend them a touch of beauty.

It was under the latter circumstances that Mr. Durham arrived in this locality, on the morning after his conversation with Mr. Barlow. The sky was blue, the air was bright and keen, and a carpet of virgin whiteness was spread on the street as though for an angel's visit. He dismissed his cab at the corner, and walked to the number which he had in view, taking note of the character of the place as he did so. Poor people must live somewhere, and where they live there will be the signs of poverty, but such appearances need not suggest disreputability. In Bleak Street, however, they did so. Though the morning was advanced, there were few people up and stirring, which is in itself a bad

sign. The pavements, in fact, were deserted, except when the public-houses occurred, where there was a thick fringe of humanity of both sexes; and even the shops had but just begun to open. No. 80 was neither better nor worse than its neighbour houses; in common with the rest, its dingy blinds were drawn down, like a nightbird that closes its eyes to the sun; and its bell-handle, broken by some importunate and reckless hand, projected from the door. There was a knocker, however, grimed with the dirt of ages, to which Mr. Durham applied himself once, twice, and thrice. Even then he did not gain admittance, but a bolt was withdrawn, and the door opened a very little way, rattling on its still restraining chain. The lined and shrivelled face of an old woman presented itself; her head was white as the blossom of the almond-tree, but if reverence was the accompaniment, as it should be, of her silver hair, it did not manifest itself in her manner.

"What the deuce do you want?" she inquired in a harsh shrill voice. "Waking up honest people with your clatter at this time in the morning!"

There were several points in this appeal to which the visitor might justly have taken exception. He had not made more noise than was necessary, and only through the legitimate channel, the knocker; it was eleven o'clock A.M.; and the notion of the woman's being honest—to anyone who had caught sight of her face—was ridiculous. However, Mr. Durham only inquired very civilly, "Does Lucy Mortlock lodge here?"

"No, she don't," answered the woman.

Independently of the fact that she almost shut the door in his face as she spoke, there was a tone of irritation in her reply that did not escape the visitor.

"Can you tell me where she does lodge?"

"No; it's nothing to me." Here she left but a mere cranny of space between them. Mr. Durham and herself might have been Pyramus and Thisbe for the opportunity afforded him for communication.

"That's a pity," he said quietly, "because I've got some money for her."

"Money!" The yellow face gleamed as though it were itself a golden coin; the chain was rattled back as though fire was behind her; and the door was thrown open with a promptness that to a classical mind suggested the story of Danae.

"*Harpax, rapax*," murmured Mr. Durham, smiling upon the old woman nevertheless with much urbanity. As a matter of fact, she was not the least like a harpy, who is a full-bosomed creature with wings, but no doubt his quotation had reference to her moral qualities. However, she really had claws, and she worked them to and fro as she slowly repeated to herself the word that had been his "open sesame"—"Money, money."

"Yes, I have got some money for her," he continued, "and would gladly pay a few shillings to know her whereabouts. She lodged here once, did she not?"

"Yes, she lodged here." It was curious to see the conflict of emotions (all bad ones) that contended in the woman's face. "Was this man," it seemed to

say, "a friend of this girl or an enemy? If the former, it behoved her to speak civilly." But the eyes above the working mouth flashed hate.

"I have no interest in her one way or the other," said Mr. Durham. "I am here merely to discharge a duty."

"You're her father," said the old woman shortly.

"Not that I am aware of," replied Mr. Durham drily; "if it were so, probably I should have heard of it before this. No."

"You must be a friend, then, a dear friend, if you wish to give her money."

"Not at all; I never saw her in my life; and, if I may say so without discourtesy, I don't want to see her."

"Then, I'll give her the money *for* you."

"Then she knows where she is," thought Mr. Durham. Under less urgent circumstances he would have contemplated the lady before him with much suspicion as the voluntary administrator of a trust fund, for she looked the very last person in the world to inspire confidence in that capacity. "You are most obliging," he said; "but I must see her myself."

"How much is it?" she inquired.

"It is ten shillings."

"Then, I don't know where she is."

Mr. Durham smiled; the little drama was inspiring him with a certain interest. He flattered himself that he could see into this woman's heart: which was impossible, because she had none.

"It appears you are angry with her. Has she behaved badly to you?"

"Badly!" The word perhaps had little significance for her; it might even have had a complimentary sense, had she but known it; but she had no intention of being complimentary. "I hate her," she answered simply; "she shall never get ten shillings through me."

"Suppose I give you five and her five?" suggested Mr. Durham. "That will be a pretty good commission for you."

"Too much, too much for *her*," muttered the old hag. "She ran away from me; I have not even got her clothes. She had good clothes."

"That seems hard," answered Mr. Durham mechanically. For the moment, he had forgotten the object of his mission. The individual of whom he was in search had almost vanished from his ken. He was thinking of the world in which this woman lived—a world outside the world. No doubt, in this miserable den every farthing was screwed out of the lodger; it was very unlikely that her late tenant had cheated such a skinflint; she had probably fled from her in fear rather than in debt. It was doubtless this woman's wont to take first what little money her victims might be possessed of, and then to retain their clothes in ransom for her rent. And she was enraged because the girl had escaped her clutches, with her little wardrobe.

"Hard," she repeated, in a low harsh voice like the suppressed snarl of a dog; "ay, it was very hard."

It was strange that she did not indulge in vituperation of her late lodger; but, as Mr. Durham

reflected, that might or might not be to that young lady's credit. If she had spoken out she might have had something good to say of the girl, which to her eyes, so long blinded to the right, would have been the reverse of eulogy; on the other hand, if she had been robbed—of which even robbers, in their own case, perceive the injustice—she would certainly have said so.

"Well, madam, I have made you a handsome offer," said Uncle Stephen; "if I increase it, it would be still more at this poor girl's expense. Would it be fair to give you seven-and-sixpence out of this half-sovereign"—and he produced the coin from his waistcoat-pocket—"and only half-a-crown to her? What would she say to me—and of you?"

"Ah, tell her *that*," broke in the old woman vehemently; "give me the three half-crowns, and tell her *that*, and you shall know where she lives. Only, you must make her understand that she would have had gold—gold—but for me. Everything will be pawned by this time—her very shawl from her back—and it is bitter cold."

"It is not *my* money," said Uncle Stephen, with a pretence of hesitation. "I don't know what the gentleman will say."

"The gentleman? What gentleman?" inquired the old woman sharply. "Not the man who would have married her if he could"—Uncle Stephen's heart sank within him—"not Mr. Butt?"

"Yes, Mr. Butt."

"Then, she has seen the last of him. He would never have sent her money—only half-a-sovereign,

too—but that he has cut his cable and slipped away. And she was going to be so happy ever afterwards! Oh, this is blessed news!” And the old woman clapped her skinny hands together and looked up at the dust-grimed ceiling as though it had been the cerulean vault of Heaven.

“Used he often—to come and see her?” inquired Mr. Durham.

“No, not often. ‘Business in the City,’ he said, prevented him. Business that was not over even in the evening. Ha, ha! And she believed that she had only to hold up her little finger to have him safe. Give me the money. She has gone to No. 50 in the square yonder; this place was not nearly good enough for her ladyship, since she was so soon to become Mrs. Butt. Oh, rare good news! Let me go with you, that I may see her when she hears it.”

This prospect was so alarming—especially as she began to make her simple preparations for departure by tying her filthy cap-strings under her chin—that Uncle Stephen fairly trembled. His mission was embarrassing enough in any case, but to perform it in company with this haridan he felt to be impossible. Luckily, a thought struck her.

“No, I won’t go,” she said abruptly. “If she saw me with you, she would guess that there was something wrong.”

“Very likely,” observed Uncle Stephen with unconscious irony; “indeed, most likely. I had better go alone. No. 50 in Bleak Square, you said?”

"That's it; that's where you are to leave her her last half-crown."

The sources of happiness are very diverse; but it was really astonishing to see the satisfaction that the contemplation of disappointment about to befall a fellow-creature afforded this aged crone. The last Mr. Durham saw of her was in the act of performing a sort of fandango—a Spanish dance illustrative of the happiness of two young hearts—on her own doorstep.

"I hope the landlady No. 50 will not be like that," sighed Mr. Durham, as he went his way, wiping his brow as though it had been midsummer.

Bleak Square, although by no means a fashionable locality, was much more superior to the street of the same name than squares in general are to streets. The houses, though dingy and dull-looking, were of good size, and looked out on a plot of grass the object of which, though by no means carried out, was the semblance of a garden. In the midst of it stood a statue, the name of which was unknown, but which, from the circumstance of its having one arm broken off, was erroneously supposed to be Lord Nelson. Mr. Durham's knock at No. 50 was answered without the precautions used in Bleak Street, yet, as in that case, by the landlady herself, a buxom, pleasant-looking widow, who smiled as buxom widows who let lodgings always do smile upon old gentlemen presumably in search of them.

"Does Lucy Mortlock live here?"

The smile faded from the woman's lips and was replaced by a look of genuine interest.

"She did, sir, up to a week ago."

"Where has she gone?"

"Well, sir, I do not exactly know, but I believe they went to Paris."

"They? Who do you mean by they?"

There was a look of dismay and apprehension in Uncle Stephen's face which at once reflected itself in that of the landlady.

"Well, with her husband, sir; I hope you don't know anything to the contrary."

"What do you mean by 'to the contrary'?"

"Oh, nothing, sir, I'm sure. I have not a word to say against her to any friend of the young lady's; quite the reverse, so far as I know. But it has been always on my mind that there might be something amiss with—Mr. Butt."

"Why?"

"Well, I can't exactly say. It was a long engagement, as I understand, which is always so far satisfactory; and yet—perhaps you will step inside, sir. This was her sitting-room. She was not with me many days, but a more quiet, well-behaved young person I never had to do with."

Mr. Durham had his questions to ask, of course; but his curiosity was tame indeed beside that expressed in the countenance of his companion. It seemed as though it was he who was there to impart information, and she to seek it.

"Of course I only speak as I find," she went on. "I know nothing of her belongings, though I have

every cause to believe"—and here she looked at Mr. Durham in a very complimentary way—"that they are most respectable. She brought no reference with her, by reason of her having to move suddenly from her last lodgings—the woman, it appears, took advantage of her friendless condition to treat her very cruelly. The poor young lady had very little money, and, between ourselves, sometimes fancied it was that which drove her to take up with Mr. Butt. But doubtless you know the gentleman, and I may be quite mistaken."

"I am not sure whether I know him or not. What sort of man was he?"

"Well, sir, I never saw him more than a minute or two together, and that only on two occasions. He was not as tall as yourself by many inches, I should say: rather a heavy-built man, with short brown hair. His manner was peculiar; it may have been my fancy, but he always seemed to me to be desirous of concealment."

Mr. Durham could hardly repress a groan; the description, though vague, tallied with his nephew's appearance; and those last words seemed to corroborate his worst fears.

"Do you know, sir," continued the landlady confidentially, "I have even sometimes thought that Butt might not have been his real name?"

"Why so?" inquired Mr. Durham.

"Because once when I addressed him by that name he seemed to take no notice. Yet Miss Mortlock always called him Mr. Butt."

The last thing Uncle Stephen had had in his

mind before leaving home had been to possess himself of Matthew's portrait, which he knew Sabey possessed; but, as we know, Mr. Signet had removed it for his own purposes, and it had not yet been returned. In his heart of hearts he now felt relieved that he had not got it with him. It would have cleared up his doubts, of course; but also, perhaps, extinguished his last hope.

"You say that Mr. Butt and this young woman were married?"

"He took her away with him from this house, as I believe, to the registrar's office. I don't hold with marriages, myself, as is done out of church, but they are none the less binding, they tell me. That Mr. Butt was fond of her in his way, I don't doubt, and let us only hope it will last. Howsoever, I never saw a man on his wedding-day look so much as though he had something—quite different from a bride and a trip to Paris—upon his mind. Our Sally, who is a blunt one, but sharp too—said he looked for all the world like some one as knew the police were after him."

"And on what day did this happen?"

"On Saturday morning; the last Saturday as ever was."

This was Saturday the 12th of December; the morning on which Matthew Helston had disappeared.

Uncle Stephen answered nothing, but looked round him in a helpless manner. His intelligence was as keen as ever, but in old age a mental shock causes the energies to flag instead of stimulating.

them. The vital power which prompts one to return blow for blow with Fate is wanting.

"That's her photo you're a-looking at," continued the landlady, mistaking the cause of his silence, and perceiving his listless gaze had fixed itself upon a photograph-case upon the table. "She gave it me—poor dear, it was the only thing she had to give—the day before she went away. It's as like as like—only, it took her at her best and brightest. I've seen her very woful and cast down. Even then she was pretty, but not like this."

She placed the portrait in the old man's trembling hand. It was, as she said, a pretty face, but one could easily imagine that the smile upon it had been a forced one; the eyes were too soft not to have been acquainted with tears, and yet they were not all softness. The general impression of the features was not so attractive after the first glance.

"To think," muttered Uncle Stephen to himself, "that a face like this should have stolen Matthew Helston's heart from Sabey's keeping!" Then he added aloud, "Might I be permitted to purchase this picture?"

"Nay, sir, you must not ask that," answered the landlady quickly. "I should be sorry to part with it—and still more for money. But if it will not be used to her disadvantage in any way—you must promise me *that*——"

"To her disadvantage?"

"Well, sir, I may be mistaken, but it strikes me that you look upon the young woman with some dis-

favour; your interest in her, I conclude, is upon her husband's account, and not on her own."

Mr. Durham inclined his head.

"I thought so. Well, I have known mischief made before now between newly-married couples by their relatives; things have been cast up by them against one or the other—generally the bride. Her life before marriage has been put under the microscope like; her photograph is handed about, till it sometimes gets into the Divorce Court to be a witness against her."

"And you think it might be so in this case?" observed Mr. Durham significantly.

"I don't say that," answered the widow, "but I know that the path of life for young women who are poor is set with snares, and that beauty is often a curse to them instead of a blessing. And when such a girl—with a good heart, mind you, and a tender one too, though maybe she may have a temper of her own—gets respectably married, I for one don't hold with the pack as is always hunting with their noses to the ground for every bit of dirt, and giving tongue when they have found it, in hopes to tear her reputation to pieces. I speak warmly, sir," added the good lady apologetically, wiping her ample face with her pocket-handkerchief, "because I feel warmly."

"And your feelings do you honour," said Uncle Stephen simply. "Heaven forbid that I should seek to harm this young woman. I come here with no such intention, but in order to do her a material
it, which can only be effected by finding out

where she is to be found. "This photograph may help me if you will let me have the loan of it."

To this the landlady readily agreed; and putting the portrait in his pocket, Uncle Stephen shook her very cordially by the hand and took his leave.

His intention was to have the picture copied, and a search secretly made for the original; for wherever Lucy Mortlock was to be found he had now the strongest conviction that Matthew Helston would not be far off.

CHAPTER XII.

DESERTERS.

THE ordinary proceedings of Uncle Stephen, though it is true he did not often stir abroad, were too erratic to cause inquiry as to his absence from home; and moreover the only person who would have been privileged to ask questions—and had, indeed, occasionally done so in her artless way—was much too absorbed in her own sad thoughts to do so now. But nevertheless Mr. Durham was on thorns throughout the day lest some allusion should be made to his visit that morning to Bloomsbury. He fancied that he read suspicion in Amy's eyes, although at most she could only guess, of course, that he had been engaged on some expedition concerning Matthew; and he felt—what that gentleman's society had never before afforded him—a great relief and satisfaction when the hour came round for Mr. Frank

Barlow's return from business. No practical help, indeed, was likely to come from him—nor, indeed, from any quarter—but in communicating what had happened to him he felt that the burden on his own shoulders, which was becoming intolerable, would at least be lightened by being shared.

Until after dinner, however, nothing could be said, on account of Amy's presence, who seemed more depressed about her sister's condition than usual.

"It is not only that she cannot sleep," she said, "but her restlessness and anxiety during the daytime has become more acute. She is very still; but walks about her room continually, except when she is writing at her desk."

"What does she write?" inquired Mr. Barlow.

"That she will not tell me. When I am with her she does not do it; she shuts her desk and locks it (as though, poor darling, she feared even I should pry into her secret), and sometimes I have seen quite a heap of notepaper torn up to shreds and lying at her feet."

"It is a serious sign," mused Uncle Stephen.

"I fear so. Oh, Mr. Durham, I sometimes tremble for my sweet sister's reason."

"Hush, hush, let us not anticipate, Amy. Evil enough, God knows, has already befallen her."

"Yes, He knows it; that is my only comfort. He will surely find a way for her to escape that worst of calamities. I could almost wish—dearly as I love, deeply as I revere him—that Matthew's death and innocence could be established together. This

suspense is becoming beyond her power to bear. If his fate could be put beyond a doubt, and his calumniators to shame, that would be almost better."

"It would be much better," assented Uncle Stephen, with a sigh that was almost a groan.

"They say 'time cures all,'" continued Amy, "but can it cure this? I try to look forward to some future when this calamity shall seem even to her to be overpast; it will leave its shadow, of course, for many a year; but, with her child to love and live for—— No, I cannot realise it," she added, with a little sob. "Oh, my poor Sabey!"

"My dear Amy," said Frank gently, "it *will* be realised; the day of comfort for us all seems far off at present, but it will surely come. Life will have new conditions for Sabey, and, as you say, very hard ones; but we shall have your sister with us, and in the end like her old self."

He put his hand on hers, the open palm of which she had placed forlornly on the table; but it did not return his pressure.

"No, Frank, not like herself."

To Uncle Stephen, who was watching these two young people attentively, the contrast in their manner of speech was significant. Mr. Barlow, of course, was wrapped up in his promised bride: "we shall have your sister with us;" whereas Amy did not appear to contemplate the future as regarded herself at all. For the present, at least, it was evident she entertained no dreams of wedded bliss. Her life, like his, was wrapped up in another's—but that other was not her lover. Mr. Durham knew the passionate devotion

which Amy entertained for her sister, and how capable she was of self-sacrifice; and he felt that if his fears, founded on what he had heard that morning, should be confirmed, the effect of the calamity that had befallen their little household might extend beyond it.

"If only that sting of the world's false judgment could be taken away," continued Amy meditatively, "I should have hopes for her."

"But, my dear Amy," urged Mr. Barlow, "I thought we had agreed that that very sting, in rousing her to resentment, had in some measure mitigated her despondency, and so far was therefore not to be deplored."

"It gave her a fictitious strength, Frank," she answered sorrowfully, "but in producing her present excitement and disquiet, has, I fear, disclosed a new danger. It is a sad lot to have but one hope in the world—that the memory of him we have lost should be rescued from execration."

"Nevertheless, darling, when that has been fulfilled there will be other hopes."

"It is possible," answered Amy, rising from her seat to go upstairs. "When one sees what has happened here—to the noblest—to the gentlest—everything seems possible in the way of evil. And it may be so in the way of good."

"When things are at their worst, as they are with Sabey, they must surely mend, my dear."

She only answered with a sigh and left the room.

The two men looked at one another significant

"I never saw dear Amy like that before," said Mr. Barlow.

"Have you never known what it is to lose faith in good?" inquired Uncle Stephen abruptly.

"Well, really, I don't quite understand the phrase. No night is so dark but it precedes the dawn. There is shadow as well as sunshine in the world, of course. If one read one's Bible——"

"You will see if you read that," interrupted Uncle Stephen, "that there is a time when the clouds instead of the sunshine return after the rain. I have reached that time in the ordinary course. These poor girls have arrived there prematurely—God help them!"

"Still, as I have said, when things are at their worst they must needs mend."

"But, what *is* their worst? It has not been reached in this case. I have been to Bleak Street."

"Great Heavens! Have you heard news of Helston?"

"You used to call him Matthew," observed Uncle Stephen.

"Of course—did I say Helston?"

"You did, because you read in my face that he had gone off with Lucy Mortlock."

"And with the diamonds?" gasped Mr. Barlow.

"The one fact—if it be a fact—I conclude, involves the other."

"But, is it a fact? It appears to me incredible."

"Then, how must it appear to *me*?" returned Uncle Stephen bitterly. "You shall judge, however, for yourself."

Then he told him all that had happened on his expedition that morning, even to the very words used by the two landladies, of which he had taken note. In this respect the identification of the man Butt with Matthew seemed to be complete. The personal description of him—middle- or even undersized—"not so tall as yourself" (Mr. Durham) "by many inches," rather "heavy-built, with short brown hair," and especially with a manner suggestive of concealment—tallied with him as much as description could do. But the other circumstances were still more conclusive. The first woman had said that the man only called in the daytime; probably between one and two, when Matthew was supposed to leave Paulet Street for his dinner. Then, again, there was the date; on the very morning of that fatal Saturday he had called for the girl with the intention, as she believed, or pretended to believe, of marrying her. "And he looked," as the lodging-housemaid had observed, "like one as knows the police is after him."

"These things are terrible," said Mr. Barlow after a long silence, "but still they may be mere coincidences. Circumstantial evidence is at once the strongest and weakest of proofs. You saw with your own eyes and heard with your own ears, and are therefore the better judge; still—— By-the-bye, you went to the registrar's office, of course?"

"No; the woman did not indicate it; they had only told her, it seems, that it was in the neighbourhood."

"Well, it does not much matter."

"You mean that a fraudulent marriage would only add another crime to—give me a glass of wine, Barlow—well, we must go through with this; though, since my help is useless, I would that I had been in my grave first. Where this woman is, there is this man, of course; and I forgot to say that I obtained her photograph. Here it is." And he threw it across the table to his companion.

Mr. Barlow took it up as though it had been a dead adder, and opened it, holding it a long way off.

"To think," said Uncle Stephen, "that that was Sabey's rival!"

"It is a pretty face," said Mr. Barlow, a little mollified by the inspection.

"True," replied the other bitterly; "I had forgotten you were a young man. For a pretty face empires have been lost, and much more than empires—friendship and love and honour. Why should we wonder?"

"I wonder still," said Mr. Barlow gravely.

"But, do you still believe Matthew innocent?"

"I think it still possible it may be so. Yes, I do."

"Mr. Barlow," exclaimed Uncle Stephen with emotion, "you are a good fellow; you have a sound heart. I have misjudged you. You are worthy of the girl of your choice. She is——" Here the door opened and Amy entered.

She saw that something had occurred to move them both, and looked from one to the other inquiringly. As they did not speak, however, "I am

come for a glass of wine for Sabey," she said; and her eye, glancing to the table, fell on the open photograph.

"Where did you find this?" cried she excitedly. "It belongs to Matthew, of course?"

Uncle Stephen nodded assent. It did, alas! belong to him in a sense; and in thus answering her own question she had relieved them from a great embarrassment.

"For Heaven's sake," she continued, "do not let Sabey see it."

"Why not?" inquired Uncle Stephen.

"Because just now it would give her pain. That is the portrait of one to whom—years ago—poor Matthew was much attached. It was a boyish love, and, as I have heard, sadly misplaced."

"Did you know her?"

"Yes; she was the miller's daughter at Latbury. It is a sad story, but Matthew was in no way to blame."

"I will take charge of this," said Mr. Barlow, putting the portrait into his pocket. "It will be better under the circumstances to keep it out of the house."

"As you say, Frank, under the circumstances, perhaps it will," said Amy. "The matter, however, you should understand, was never kept secret from dear Sabey. Matthew was incapable of concealment even if anything had been to his discredit in the affair, which was not the case."

She took up the glass of wine which Mr. Barlow had poured out, and left the room with a somewhat

firmer step than usual. Though not a word had been spoken against Matthew by either of her auditors, her tone had been firm too. Perhaps because they were men she suspected them of suspecting ill of him in such a matter.

As the door closed behind her, Uncle Stephen and Mr. Barlow exchanged a look of terrible significance.

"There, then, is the key of it all," said the former despairingly. "The theory of mere coincidence is no longer tenable. If Lucy Mortlock is Phœbe Mayson, as she undoubtedly is, our last hope is gone. Is it not so?"

Mr. Barlow bowed his head in melancholy assent. Another of Matthew Helston's allies had deserted his cause. There was no one now who believed in his integrity save two helpless women.

CHAPTER XIII.

HER LADYSHIP AND SABEY.

"Amy, dear," said Sabey upon the morning after Uncle Stephen's visit to Bloomsbury, "Lady Pargiter is coming here this morning."

"Lady Pargiter? And coming here?" reiterated Amy in a tone that had at least as much disgust as surprise in it.

"Yes; I have written to her about Matthew. As to the wicked thoughts of others—what the world at large, I mean, may choose to believe of my poor

husband—that is a matter for their own consciences. The uncharitable and the merciless, God will judge. But this woman has been robbed by some one.”

“Mr. Signet does not think so,” observed Amy.

“Well, he says he does not; and perhaps he does not. But Uncle Stephen and Frank think him quite mistaken; and indeed so do we. It is impossible that any woman can be so abandoned—so heartless—as not only to have stolen those diamonds, but to suffer the blame to be laid on innocent shoulders. She lays the blame on shoulders which she honestly believes to be guilty—and that is what I cannot bear. If she saw me, if she heard me—a wife speaking for her lost husband—she would be convinced that he was not to blame.”

Amy shook her head. “No, Sabey, it is just because you are Matthew’s wife that she would not believe you. What did you write to her?”

“I wrote to her as one woman to another, as one wife to another; I besought her, for God’s sake and charity’s, not to wrong Matthew’s memory by her unjust suspicions. I said that I knew what was said against her by some persons, but that I for one did not believe her guilty.”

“You said that?” exclaimed Amy.

“Yes; why not? If she is tempted to believe ill of others, am not I also tempted? Are her lost diamonds dearer to her than my lost Matthew is to me?”

“It is not that, Sabey; but I was thinking that your expressing confidence in her innocence might

be of disadvantage to our friends—for has not Mr. Signet proved himself our friend?"

"Yes, I feel that. But I cannot see how my letter can interfere with any proceedings of Mr. Signet; nay, if I convince Lady Pargiter of the truth, it must be beneficial to him."

"Nevertheless, darling, I am sorry you wrote without consulting with Uncle Stephen or with Frank."

"And I am sorry too, so far," she answered quietly. "Heaven knows, they have a claim upon my confidence. And you—you above all, dear Amy——" Here her voice trembled and sank.

"Do not speak of me, Sabey; my advice would have been of small value."

"No, no; on the contrary, it would have been priceless. It is your words, your love, your fealty to Matthew, that keep me alive—though it is not on that account, alas! I thank you for them. But this was a matter on which I felt I could not brook advice. I had only to consult upon it one—who is not here save in the spirit. Forgive me, darling."

"My sweet Sabey, I have nothing to forgive. I only fear you may have something to regret in seeing this woman. What has Lady Pargiter written to you?"

"Only this." She put the note into Amy's hand. "Lady Pargiter will call in Cavendish Grove at 11 A.M. to-morrow."

"Do you mean to see her alone, Sabey?"

"If you do not mind—if you will not think it a

want of trust in your judgment—which it is very far from being—I would rather it were so.”

“By all means, darling,” assented Amy. It seemed to her quite natural that Sabey should wish to make her appeal to Lady Pargiter without a witness, while she herself was much relieved by that arrangement. She had a secret apprehension that this woman, of whom she had heard so much, and nothing good, might “say things” to poor Sabey which the presence of another would make more poignant.

At eleven o'clock Lady Pargiter's carriage appeared in the little crescent, where its like had never before been seen. The gigantic hammer-cloth seemed to brush both sides of the way; the tall footman upon the swingboard behind raked the first floor with those killing eyes which in Mayfair were wont to do execution in areas. His application to the knocker at No. 13 was for that neighbourhood so unusually vigorous, that its object, to the affrighted Mary, seemed to be to bring down the house.

With stately yet excited steps, like a hearse-horse landing from a railway truck, Lady Pargiter descended from the vehicle and was ushered into the parlour.

Sabey rose to receive her with the quiet dignity which sorrow confers upon the frailest and gentlest, and motioned her to a chair.

“I had rather stand,” said Lady Pargiter.

Her voice was harsh, her manner was stern almost to ferocity. So might a hawk visiting a

lovecot have declined the hospitality of its trembling tenant. But it was not with fear that Sabeý rembled.

"I received your letter, Mrs. Helston, in which you are so good as to say you acquit me of having robbed and murdered your husband."

"Indeed, Lady Pargiter, I did not put it so. I only wished you to feel that I had no sympathy with those who blamed you in this matter."

If Lady Pargiter felt grateful for this, she concealed the emotion with great skill; but she could not conceal her foot, which was very large, and beat upon the floor impatiently.

"Well, madam?"

"What I wished to convince you of, Lady Pargiter, was that any suspicion you might entertain of wrong done to you by my poor husband was as baseless as, and far more cruel than, the imputation against yourself. He is not here to defend himself; I fear that he is dead."

"And my diamonds?"

This inquiry, though not brilliant, might have been compared with the stones she mentioned, so hard was each word as it dropped from her white lips like beads from a string.

"It was on account of them I wrote," continued Sabeý. "You are the only person, I do not say who has any right—for even you have no right—but who has any excuse for thinking evil of my husband. You have suffered a heavy loss—though, as compared with mine, it is small indeed—and apparently by his means—and the expression of my deep regret

was therefore due to you. Above all, I earnestly desired to convince you of Matthew's innocence—Lady Pargiter," she continued in impassioned tones, "since his Divine Master's time, a purer and more blameless man than Matthew Helston never walked this earth. I speak not as his wife—he was known to be so by all who knew him. If throughout his past there should be found a single blot of which it might be said, 'That stains him,' you might think what you will. But he is free from stain. He may have wronged himself—he did so, for of late he doubted of his own mental powers—but of wrong to others he was incapable. He was the soul of justice and of honour; to doubt him—oh, believe me!—is to doubt of the beauty of yonder smiling Heaven, or of the goodness of the God who made it. The bitterness of death, Lady Pargiter, is hard to bear, but the bitterness of shame is harder. Yet, if it was my own shame I could bear it—suffering wrongfully; but for him—for him—oh, spare me. I will pray for you, I will work for you, I will do what you will, if you will only believe my Matthew innocent. Your heart is touched—I see it in your face—your good angel stirs within you—comfort me—comfort me—who am in such sore need of comfort, by one little word."

That there was a change in Lady Pargiter's face was true enough; and a change for the better. The expression was still hard as adamant, but the fury in her eyes was quenched. What Sabey, however, had taken for pity was contempt.

"I do not know whether it was my good angel

or my own folly, woman," she said scornfully, "but I entertain another view of you than that I held some minute ago. Then, I thought you were a scheming, lying rogue. I thought that you wanted me to forgive the thief who had stolen my property; that you dreamt of moving me by your tears and prayers and poverty—which are the stock-in-trade of folks like you—to bear lightly on this villain. It seems to me now that you are a silly fool. Still, you may have some sense; therefore, listen. You say you will do what I will. Put that man Signet within my power; tell me something concerning him in this matter of which the law can lay firm hold—complicity, conspiracy, I care not what it is, so that I ruin him—and then—on the restitution of the jewels—I swear not to prosecute your husband."

Sabey passed her little hand over her forehead, pressing it there for a moment as she did so. "I do not understand," she murmured; "I cannot have heard aright."

"I spoke plainly enough too. Of course it is ways difficult, where two rogues are concerned, to ck out one for punishment and spare the other. It in this case, as I am told, it can be done. The n Signet was the ruling spirit; he was the master your Matthew, as you call him; and therefore t to blame. As the prosecutor I can appeal in case to the mercy of the Court. That you are —and have a child to keep, as I see"—(the t was asleep in its cradle, placed there, no t, by Sabey to move her visitor's heart)—"will ll in his favour. He will get off at all events

with a light sentence. Whereas Signet"—and Lady Pargiter closed her great teeth with a snap, and clenched her hands and shook them, as though each clutched a phantom jeweller by the neck—"he will have his deserts."

"A light sentence! And for Matthew? You must be mad!" cried Sabey. "I tell you he is as innocent as yonder babe."

"True, I forgot. Well, once for all poor fool!—I tell you he is guilty. I got the proofs of it this very morning."

"The proofs of Matthew's guilt!"

"Yes; a most certain proof."

"You lie," cried Sabey. Slight as she was, and, compared with Lady Pargiter, as a lily of the valley to a Scotch thistle, she towered before her now erect, defiant, and her eyes flashed scorn for scorn.

For a moment the pitiless hawk quailed before this dove in defence of her mate. Then she answered slowly, "So it was all put on, was it? You can bluster and rate with the best—or the worst. You need say no more, madam. I am not taken in twice by anybody. And I will say only this: a week ago the man Signet, your husband's confederate—and, as I see now, yours—came to my house, and, using the same tools as you have done (only, they were sharper then), insulted, maligned, and defied me. I told him that the next day I should do something that would make him tremble. But I was meanwhile advised that such a step would be unwise. With the proof in my hand of which I

spoke it will be no longer so. And to-morrow—to-morrow—it shall be done. That child yonder will live to curse its mother because she rejected my counsel—the last chance that was offered her to save its father from a felon's doom.

“Go, miserable woman, and do your worst!” cried Sabey, pointing to the door. “Standing there, where he has so often stood, you are committing sacrilege; to breathe the same air with you is poison to me. Go, and pray Heaven for a human heart. Go! go!”

So terrible was the scorn with which she spoke, that even Lady Pargiter bowed her stiff neck before it and in a manner fled. Not till she found herself at the hall-door, with the keen wind blowing upon her, did the voice of nature—or at all events of second nature—assert itself, reminding her that she was a baronet's wife, with 30,000*l.* a year, whom it was impossible (however things looked to the contrary) that anyone could have treated with disdainfulness.

Then, sitting in her roomy carriage, as in a four-stall stable, the whole scene recurred to her, not as it had really happened, but as between a person of quality who had had losses, and an insolent female of the lower orders whose husband had been the cause of them, and her heart was full of hatred and malice and all uncharitableness, and within it was burning unwaveringly the flame of a great revenge.

CHAPTER XIV.

• "I CANNOT WRITE IT, AMY."

UNCLE STEPHEN and Amy had been sitting alone in the dining-room while Lady Pargiter had been closeted with Sabey in the next room. But he received the news of who the visitor was with a listlessness that was almost indifference, and for which Amy was utterly at a loss to account. Perhaps it was but the unconcern of old age; but if so, that attribute of his period of life had come to him very suddenly. Her first words to him had been an apology for her sister. She regretted, she said, that Sabey had taken so important a step without consulting with the rest of the family, and especially with that member of it who had always had her interests so much at heart as himself. But it was a matter of feeling with Sabey. In her forlorn and miserable case much must be excused to her: she was quite aware that the utmost confidence was Mr. Durham's due, and had expressed herself to that effect.

"Poor soul, poor soul!" sighed Uncle Stephen.

"For my own part," continued Amy, "I cannot suppose that any good can come out of such an interview. Sabey fondly hopes to persuade Lady Pargiter to think Matthew—what we know him to be—incapable of an injustice, far less of a crime."

Uncle Stephen bowed his white head. The gesture struck her as peculiar: no doubt it was in

assent, yet it seemed rather a mere sign that he was attending to her words.

"For the opinion of the world dear Sabey has tried to persuade herself that she cares nothing; it is not so, alas! Mr. Durham; every dart that is aimed at poor Matthew's reputation reaches her sore and breaking heart; but the chief venom no doubt lies in those words which Lady Pargiter has spoken against him. For to the woman herself, no doubt, they have some sort of justification."

"No doubt, no doubt," repeated Uncle Stephen mechanically.

"Of course, if Sabey could convince her, it would be a great consolation; but from all one has heard of Lady Pargiter there can be little hope of that; and I fear—I greatly fear—that she may say things to wound Sabey."

"That is only too probable, my dear."

It was not often that Uncle Stephen used affectionate epithets—though his manner, like his conduct, was to both sisters kindness itself; when he did so, they were generally evoked by pity, and therefore significant of sorrow. There was sorrow enough, it was true, beneath that roof; but he had hitherto confined this particular expression of his sympathy to the chief sufferer—Sabey herself.

"Another thing that troubles me in this matter, Mr. Durham, is that my sister's taking this step may give umbrage to Mr. Signet. Dear Frank is prejudiced against him; but with respect to Matthew—whatever may be his motives—Mr. Signet has been very loyal, and so far we owe him, at least, con-

sideration. I think he ought to be informed of what has happened."

"That can do no harm," sighed Uncle Stephen. Amy noticed how despairing was his tone.

"Has anything happened—any bad news—since the morning, Mr. Durham?" she inquired earnestly. "Oh, pray, pray, be open with me."

"No, my dear; nothing new has happened. You were speaking of Mr. Signet?"

"Yes; I think a note should be written to him explaining under what circumstances Sabey has sought this interview, the tidings of which I am sure will be unwelcome to him. Would you mind writing to him?"

She blushed and hesitated as she spoke, for the request was made upon Frank's account, who was averse to her having any communication with Mr. Signet.

"What do you wish me to write to him?" asked Mr. Durham, in a dull, mechanical way.

"Well, it would be necessary to explain, I think, how deeply poor Sabey has been brooding over this unhappy matter; how almost all hope of seeing her husband again has died within her; and that what she has become most anxious and solicitous about is the clearing of his reputation. Under no other circumstances would she have taken upon herself to communicate—without consulting Mr. Signet—with Lady Pargiter. That her scheme will be utterly unsuccessful I feel certain; and if you think the same you will of course say so. That you and I and all of us are as positively satisfied of dear Matthew's

integrity as though he were here amongst us, and this catastrophe had never happened, he already knows; but still, you might add that. To an outside person like Mr. Signet, exposed to all sorts of influences, one cannot, although its reiteration seems to us so unnecessary, repeat too often that conviction."

There was a touch of professional earnestness—the tone of the teacher—in this little speech, which under any other circumstance would have tickled Uncle Stephen; the anomaly in the speaker's manner of laying down the law as contrasted with her youth and beauty would not have failed to attract his attention; it had much the same quaint and charming effect as the dressing up of a very pretty girl in a masculine attire. But, as matters were, all this only gave him pain. He felt the confidence to be misplaced; the logic valueless; the eloquence of faith, and voice, and feeling thrown away.

"I have had no communication hitherto with Mr. Signet," he replied, with his eyes upon the floor; "and I should really hardly like to write such a letter. If I thought it would do any good, that would be another matter; but it can do no good."

"Do I understand you to mean, Mr. Durham," replied Amy, looking at him with great intentness, "that you object to writing at all to Mr. Signet, or only to writing what I have suggested?"

"I don't think such a letter to be necessary, my dear," answered Uncle Stephen.

"That is not quite an answer to my question, dear Mr. Durham. Remember, you have never seen

Mr. Signet since this misfortune befell us; all that he has heard of our belief in Matthew's innocence has come from me and from Sabey. A line from you, whom he respects and admires so much, to the same effect——"

"I cannot write it, Amy," he interrupted suddenly; "do not ask me; and do not ask me why."

"There is no need, Mr. Durham," she answered quietly; "I saw it in your face last night, and I read it there again to-day. You have lost your confidence in your nephew's innocence. 'Lover and friends have forsaken me, and my kinsmen stand afar off,' says one in the Scriptures; and that is Matthew's case. To me it is incredible."

"Not more incredible to you, Amy, than to me," groaned the old man. "Besides, you are going too fast. I do not say I do not believe; but it is true that I now no longer feel that extremity of conviction which alone would justify me in confirming the faith of others."

Amy smiled a bitter smile. "I understand," she said; "poor Matt, poor Matt!"

There was silence between them for some moments. Mr. Durham stood at the window nervously stroking his white beard, and conscious, though he avoided their gaze, of Amy's reproachful eyes.

"I had thought," she said in slow regretful tones, "that, whatever might have been the world's view, we here, who know him, would have been always loyal to him. To doubt that Matthew will be proved innocent seems to me to doubt Providence itself—to question the justice of Him after whose image he

was made. It was an older man than you, sir, who told us he had never seen the righteous forsaken."

"My experience has been wider," was the quiet reply. "You are too wise a woman, Amy, to argue with such weapons in the face of facts. It does not do to substitute the particular for what is meant to be general. We are told, for example, that life is dear; and so it is! yet, Heaven knows, not to all. 'Never morning wore to evening,' says your favourite poet, 'but some heart did break.' Do folks with broken hearts wish to live, think you? No, neither in this world nor the next, Amy. They have had enough of life. Ask your sister."

"She has not found Faith waver, as you have, Mr. Durham; and even if she had, Love would remain. That will never fail her; and if I know myself, it will never fail *me*."

"Love is blind," replied the old man mournfully.

"Not love of this kind," said Amy, "whereof respect is the forerunner. I have loved Matthew for the very reason that now makes it impossible for me to impute evil to him. There is no man on earth—if he be yet on earth—whom I revere so much. I take no credit to myself for doing so now, when the world maligns him. Many have been loyal to a worthless king when misfortune has overwhelmed him; shall I be disloyal to a worthy one?"

"'Disloyal' is a harsh word, Amy, if you apply it to me," said Mr. Durham sadly. "I have heard you speak with pity of those who would believe, yet cannot; such is my case. As to love, I once knew

a man who was thrown into gaol for an imputed crime. One friend came to him and said, 'I believe in your innocence, and will stand by you;' and another came and said, 'I do not feel sure of your innocence, but in any case I will stand by you.' This latter, Amy, was not disloyal."

"I understand, Mr. Durham. May God forgive your lacking faith, as Matthew will if he lives to know it. Hush! Lady Pargiter is going away. I must go to Sabey. You must never tell her—promise me this—that you have—I forget your phrase," she added bitterly—"lost your faith in Matthew."

"No, indeed; for that, I know, would be to lose her love."

"Yes," answered Amy coldly, as she turned towards the door, "for it would kill her."

"Good Heavens! what have I done?" mused Uncle Stephen, listening mechanically to the closing of the front door and the noise of the retreating chariot-wheels. "It is plain that poor girl despises me for telling the truth, or the half-truth. There was a great temptation to tell her the whole, for her good opinion is dear to me; but, thank God! I resisted it. I had rather she should be angry with me than that I should break her heart. Yet, all must needs be known in time." "'Disloyal,' she said, just as folks say 'infidel' when a man refuses to blind his judgment. They are utterly impracticable, these women; yet, how one loves them! And, alas! how they love us! It is said, too," he added, drumming thoughtfully upon the table with his fingers, "that God loves us all."

CHAPTER XV.

THE PLACARD.

It was with some impatience that Uncle Stephen awaited that afternoon the return from the city of Mr. Barlow, who, as was usual now, was to make one of the little party of three at dinner. It was strange and sad enough to sit down to table without either host or hostess (for Uncle Stephen always considered himself in the light of a guest); but to have Amy for his sole companion, the old man felt, would be insupportable. She had remained with her sister the whole day since their interview, but he feared that she might come down before dinner-time, as she sometimes did at Sabey's request, to keep him company. He had nothing to reproach himself with, of course, but he well knew how bitterly she was reproaching him; and he was anxious to have a few words of explanation with Mr. Barlow before they all met together. His views of the young lawyer had changed of late, and much for the better. He had been favourably impressed with the firmness with which he had resisted those proofs against Matthew which he had himself deemed overwhelming; and, now that he had been perforce convinced by the identification of Butt with Helston, the secret was a common bond that drew them together more closely, perhaps, than under other circumstances could have been possible. Accordingly, on hearing Barlow's ring at the door, somewhat

before the usual time, Uncle Stephen hurried into the little hall, and with his own hands admitted—Mr. Signet.

"I am glad to see you, my dear sir," said the jeweller, in a hushed and anxious voice; "I have brought some news with me which it is quite as well should be for your private ear in the first instance. How is—how are the ladies?"

"They are upstairs. Step this way." And he led him softly down to the smoking-room. "Your news is bad news, of course?"

"Well, that is as it may be; not altogether, perhaps. It is a declaration of war—the enemy has fired the first shot."

"The enemy! What enemy?"

"Lady Pargiter, of course. She threatened as much nearly a week ago, but she thought better of it. Something must have happened in the meantime."

"She has been here this morning," remarked Mr. Durham.

"Here! In Cavendish Grove? Impossible!"

"Yes; in consequence of a letter addressed to her by Mrs. Helston. It may have been an injudicious step, perhaps, but it was well meant. We must make every allowance for a woman placed in so distressed and unexampled a position. Her object was to win Lady Pargiter over to her own views as to Matthew's innocence. I have not heard the result, but I have no doubt that she failed. Lady Pargiter, as I have gathered, is not one to be easily moved."

"Moved? I should think not! They say a diamond has a tear within it (though I never found one), and it is therefore possible that that woman—who is so hard and inflexible—may possess such a thing. But it would never be elicited by pity. Perhaps, if you trod on her corns—she looks as if she had corns——"

"But your news?" exclaimed Mr. Durham impatiently.

"Well, here it is; not my news, but everybody's news, by this time." He unfolded a huge poster in red and white:—

"£500 Reward.—Whereas Matthew Helston, agent for Mr. Signet, jeweller, absconded on the morning of Saturday, the 12th inst., from Moor Street with certain Diamond Ornaments of great value, a description of which is subjoined, the above reward will be paid on his apprehension.

"(Signed)

CHARLES PARGITER."

Of course Mr. Durham knew that sooner or later it must have come to this; but the shock was terrible. The branding of his nephew as a thief in those letters of staring red and white—to be thrust down areas and stuck on walls—brought home to him the fact of Matthew's crime and its consequences with hateful distinctness. He started back, and struck his feeble hand upon the chair, with, as Mr. Signet thought, a natural indignation.

"I don't wonder at your cutting up rough about it, Mr. Durham," he said. "'Damn her impudence!'

were my first words when the thing was brought to me, shoved (by her particular orders, no doubt) into my own letter-box. 'Absconded with her jewels,' indeed! Where's Helston's receipt for them, I should like to know? Why, to say the least of it, she's as much under suspicion as he is. I wonder her husband—who, barring that he is a spendthrift and a gambler, is a decent fellow—could have been induced to sign his name to such a document. The only thing which gives me much concern in the matter—except, of course, for the pain it must cause the ladies up yonder—is that Sir Charles himself is in it. He must have seen cause to alter his views; she would have done it long ago if she could have obtained his sanction. They've got hold of something, you may depend upon it." And Mr. Signet frowned and bit his nails.

"Got hold of some new evidence, I suppose you mean?" said Uncle Stephen, whose disgust at his companion was only mitigated by the presence of the still stronger feelings of despair and shame.

"Yes; something has turned up, no doubt; nothing conclusive, we know, but what may seem to *them* conclusive of Helston's guilt. I must consult Brail about it before returning their fire."

"And how do you propose to return it?"

"Why, in kind, to be sure. I'll offer another reward for the discovery of Matthew Helston. *Last seen, observe, at No. 10 Moor Street on the evening of December 12th, and supposed to have been made away with.* We'll put that delicately, but in such a manner that the inference shall be clear. Perhaps

we may add, 'unjustly accused of complicity' in the theft of the diamonds. She will know what that means; that will stick." And Mr. Signet rubbed his hands together with an obvious sense of enjoyment.

"Yet, 'men and women are our own flesh and blood,' people say!" muttered Uncle Stephen.

The jeweller's sharp ears, though the observation was not intended to reach them, overheard him.

"I beg your pardon, my dear sir. Lady Pargiter is *not* flesh and blood—not even to look at. She is granite—a substance useless and valueless except in large masses. And as for hurting, our only hope at best is to chip her a little. Gad! I should like to chip her nose off." Then, suddenly changing his tone for one of great respect: "I conclude I can see Miss Thurlow for a few moments?—I promised to keep her posted up in all that happened connected with this unfortunate business."

"And are you going to show her *that*?" inquired Mr. Durham, pointing to the obnoxious placard.

"Well, don't you think it better that a friend should break it to her, than that she should see it for the first time on some street hoarding, or hear it shouted out by a newsboy? That's certain to occur, you know, sooner or later."

"I suppose it is," sighed Uncle Stephen, scarce knowing what he said. His mind had projected itself into the dark future when not only should those poor women know what was being said of their idol, but when, in spite of themselves, they would have

become converts to public opinion. "There can be no harm, sir, as you say, in your telling Miss Thurlow what has happened; but not a word of this matter must be breathed to Mrs. Helston."

"I am glad you mentioned that," said Mr. Signet, "or else it might have slipped out. Then, with your permission, I will go upstairs."

"The servant will let Miss Thurlow know that you are here," said Mr. Durham coldly. "Mary, show this gentleman to the parlour."

He did not dare accompany Mr. Signet on such an errand. What could he say of comfort to the poor girl? How could he feign a sympathy with the indignation that would arise within her? Suppose she were to reproach him with his want of faith in Matthew in his late employer's presence?

So Mr. Signet went alone.

Two minutes afterwards arrived Mr. Barlow, to whom he narrated what had occurred.

"Surely the man has not shown that bill to Sabey?" exclaimed the young lawyer.

"No; I warned him against that—very luckily, as it appears, for he confessed that it might otherwise have 'slipped out.' I hope you recognise his own expression?"

"Then, he is talking to Amy alone?" observed Mr. Barlow, without noticing this disclaimer.

"I don't know, I'm sure; I hope so. He is a man not to be trusted in anything that requires delicacy."

"That is quite true," assented the other.

"Of course all this is what we had to expect,"

continued Uncle Stephen. "But that bill is most horrible. He said it would be stuck on the walls."

"It *is* stuck on the walls, Mr. Durham—on the corner of this street—I have seen it."

"Heavens! That must have been by Lady Par-giter's own orders. She must be a fiend."

"She is a woman who wants her money, or the money's worth," answered the lawyer coolly. "If she can't get her diamonds out of Helston, she will get it out of his skin; and 'if Helston is not to be got at,' she says to herself, 'then his wife shall suffer.' Talk of a tigress deprived of her young; that is nothing compared with some women who have been deprived of their property. I know the class. Moreover," continued Mr. Barlow, "she has been insulted by this man Signet. How long has the fellow been here?"

"I don't know. What does it matter?" returned Uncle Stephen. "He will not come here again. He made a shrewd guess, I think, when he said the reward would never have been offered had not some fresh evidence turned up. Otherwise Sir Charles, it seems, is not the man to have put his name to it. Depend upon it we are getting very near the end."

"Hush; that's his voice!" exclaimed Mr. Barlow excitedly.

Mr. Signet was speaking in the hall to someone, and at the same time making his way out. The door of the smoking-room was open, so that his voice could be distinctly heard.

"I am so glad I came," he said; "it is such a

comfort to find you agree with me. Whatever Brail says, I shall now take my own line, since it has obtained your approval. Good-bye, my dear Miss Amy."

"Good-bye," answered a broken voice in grateful accents. And then the front door was closed gently.

"Thank Heaven, he has not driven her mad," sighed Uncle Stephen.

"I am not so sure of that," muttered Mr. Barlow in a tone that escaped the other's ear.

"You had better go up at once," continued Mr. Durham. "She will need your advice as to Sabey; though it will be impossible, I fear, to keep her in ignorance of this last blow."

"Yes. I will go to Amy," answered Mr. Barlow gravely.

And he went upstairs: not three steps at a time, like a lover who seeks his mistress, but step by step, with a brow of care.

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CHAPTER XVI.

PARTED.

is a well-known saying, yet one that does not attract the attention it deserves, that a man's own affairs, however insignificant they may appear, are nevertheless to him of more consequence than the important concerns of other people; one proof of this, perhaps, of the selfishness of human nature, is that he that does not work altogether for ill, since he neglects those little matters of which life, after all, is made up to receive their due share of attention. A man's own affairs are, however, not necessarily confined to himself, but they are so sometimes) confined to himself, but they may have ramifications—such as wife, children, heart, and friend. It was no great blame to Matthew that, though Matthew Helston might have been robbed and murdered, or worse—had been robbed in the robbery of the Pargiter diamonds, the sun still shone for him in the person of Amy, and that he looked forward beyond the present winter of their discontent to a spring-time; that even as matters were he should have some thoughts independent of Matthew's catastrophes; doubts, suspicions, and so forth. It was not to him, ever since his brother-in-law's disappearance, that Mr. Signet had made use of that pretence to ingratiate himself with Amy; and that she might be ignorant of the real object of his attentions, he—her betrothed—had given her to

understand that they were disagreeable to him; yet the man had come to Cavendish Grove again and again, and had come to-day, and had been closeted with her for Heaven knows how long, and had parted from her with a demonstration of regard that to him (Mr. Barlow) was most offensive. He was no eavesdropper, but those words, "My dear Miss Amy," which the jeweller had uttered as he left the house, had, as it happened, reached his ears and sunk into his heart. He was not even yet jealous of Amy—in any sense of doubt as to her fidelity to him—but he was jealous of Mr. Signet.

"He will not come here any more," Uncle Stephen had said; which might or might not be the case; and it was Mr. Barlow's intention to put that matter beyond a doubt. When he entered the parlour, he met Amy coming out; she looked pale and agitated, and the traces of tears were in her eyes—which was so far fortunate, since the gravity of his own face was easily accounted for by such a spectacle.

"Oh, Frank," she said, with a little sob, "I am so glad you are come."

Whereupon he folded her in his arms. In an instant—so satisfactory was that situation—all his doubts, apprehensions, and intentions vanished from his mind. "My darling, what has troubled you?" he said, not from curiosity—for of course he knew—but because it was pleasant to be pitiful.

"A terrible thing has happened. Have you been here long, dear?"

"Some time," he answered, dropping his arms

involuntarily. "Why should she wish to know that?" thought he. "I came just after Mr. Signet arrived."

"Then, you have seen Mr. Durham? He has almost broken my heart."

"Who? Mr. Signet?"

"No, no; and yet, *he* has brought sad news enough. Of course he meant it kindly, for he has been very kind. And I must have known it sooner or later."

"You mean about the reward that Lady Pargiter has offered? That indeed is most distressing, though we must have looked for something of the kind. It was only a question of time. What is that?"

There was something on the table wrapped up in silver-paper, such as jewellers use; it looked like a locket.

"That is Matthew's portrait, which Mr. Signet has brought back with him."

It was on the other side of the table, but Mr. Barlow reached across and opened it—for the moment, I fear, with some incredulity.

Amy, however, did not notice this. "He has had some copies taken," she continued, "for purposes of identification."

"It is very like him," observed the lawyer; "yet I don't quite recognise the expression."

"He wore it once, however," she observed, with a sigh; "I remember him with it. Poor Matt, poor Matt! Then 'it was May with him from head to heel.' He had hope and life."

"Let us hope he has life now," said Mr. Barlow mechanically.

"If he has," she answered slowly, "what would it avail him, since even those near and dear to him have cast him off? If he is dead and knows that they think ill of him, can heaven itself be heaven to him?"

Mr. Barlow sighed and looked at his boots. He had nothing to observe in the way of comfort upon this head. He did not understand that Amy was accusing any person in particular, but he was guiltily conscious that she might have done so even as regarded himself.

"The absent are always in the wrong," he answered evasively.

"A proverb suitable to the frivolous and thoughtless race to whom it belongs," said Amy coldly. "Yet it seems there is truth in it. How bitter it is to find in strangers that confidence in our rectitude which is denied us by our friends!"

"If I speak in proverbs, Amy, you speak in riddles," said Mr. Barlow, nettled by her tone, or perhaps by the secret consciousness of his own abandonment of Matthew's cause. "I suppose, however, you refer to Mr. Signet, though it seems to me you can hardly call him a stranger."

"That is true," she answered, unaware of the satiric touch. "Most persons, I think, in his position would have been angered, and with reason, Sabey's having written to Lady Pargiter without consulting him."

"Did Sabey do that?"

"Yes; in hopes, poor dear, to win her over to believe in Matthew. This is the result," she added bitterly, pointing to the placard which lay crumpled up at her feet.

"There was some other reason, however, Amy, which Mr. Signet himself admitted to Mr. Durham, for Lady Pargiter's adopting so decided a step. He said that she had obtained further evidence."

"He said, Frank, that she probably believed that she had. How could she in reality have obtained it, when the more she knows can only the more establish Matthew's innocence? However, one cannot expect Mr. Signet to feel as we do in that respect; and yet he was far from disheartened. When he has once taken up anything, he is to be relied on."

"He has great perseverance—there is no doubt of that," said Mr. Barlow; "perhaps he thinks, like Lady Pargiter, that he has found some new encouragement."

"I don't understand you, Frank," said Amy quietly, "except that, as usual, you wish to disparage Mr. Signet. I can only say that he seems to me to be doing his very best for poor Matthew. And though, as I have observed, the help of a stranger may be bitter when that of a friend is denied, it is better than nothing."

"When have I denied Matthew help?" inquired Mr. Barlow quickly.

"I did not accuse you of having done so; I was not thinking of you at all, Frank."

"I can easily imagine that," he retorted. "I

know I am nothing in your thoughts as compared with another."

By this "another" Mr. Barlow really meant to imply Matthew, but Amy believed he referred to the jeweller. Her face flushed from brow to chin, and then grew very pale.

"You are mistaking me," she said very coldly, "though for the moment I shall not condescend to explain how. What I was about to say is that Mr. Signet attaches no great importance to this insult, for which he intends to make reprisals."

"That is, that since Lady Pargiter has stooped to this new mode of attack, he is about to adopt the same weapons."

"And why not?" inquired Amy. "In her hands they were offensive, but they will not be so in ours; we shall only use them to protect the innocent who have been attacked by them. By what other means can we gain the like publicity for Matthew's defence which she has obtained for his defamation?"

"Is it possible, Amy, that you do not perceive that this man Signet clings to the last straw, not from any belief in your brother-in-law's innocence, but because his guilt would entail enormous pecuniary loss? In his heart of hearts he knows——" Here Mr. Barlow stopped—such a searching, almost menacing gaze had Amy suddenly turned upon him.

"What does he know?" she cried impetuously. "What do *you* know in your heart of hearts against Matthew Helston? I was about to explain something—something that had happened in this house

to-day, which has wounded me to the quick, which, if she knew it, would kill Sabey. But now, it seems, there is worse to come. Do you believe, as Mr. Durham does, that Matthew is a thief?"

Mr. Barlow thought he had never seen Amy look so beautiful; but her beauty was of quite another sort than that he had ever seen in her before. Mr. Durham, in compliment to her acquirements, had been wont to call her playfully Minerva; but as Minerva armed with a javelin in act to strike he had never pictured her. If he had seen her now he would have likened her to that goddess come down, as of old, from Heaven, to defend with her shield some beloved mortal against foes whom in their turn she was about to smite.

"My dear Amy," said Mr. Barlow hesitatingly, "the logic of facts, to my mind at least, is inexorable. Do not blame me if by nature or training I am compelled to accept it. I am a lawyer——"

"I know it," broke in Amy in frigid tones. "Still, it is surely possible for you to give a plain answer to a plain question: 'Do you believe that Matthew Helston is a thief?'"

On more than one occasion Mr. Frank Barlow had been subjected to the test of cross-examination, and had acquitted himself with considerable credit; but this was by far the "tightest squeeze" of that description in which he had ever found himself. To answer "Yes" he had a strong presentiment might be fatal to his dearest hopes; to answer "No" was, alas! impossible.

Of course it was open to him to state what had

been discovered with respect to Phoebe Mayson, which would probably have carried conviction even to Amy's mind, and so far exonerated himself. But, with all his shortcomings, Mr. Barlow was a true gentleman; at whatever danger to himself, he had chivalry enough to feel that he should spare that already stricken heart what might prove to be an unnecessary pang. For though the theft of Lady Pargiter's jewels might and would be brought home to Matthew, the fact of his infidelity to Sabey need perhaps never be so.

"Dear Amy," he said, "I do not deny your right to ask such a question, but it is scarcely generous to exercise it. Mr. Durham, it appears, has been speaking frankly to you upon this subject, yet surely not with the directness which you have demanded of me. I can only say that the facts, as we are at present in possession of them, seem to point with a fatal unanimity in one direction. It may be that my judgment is wrong in this matter, in which case its incorrectness will make me ten thousand times more glad than accuracy has ever made me. But if unhappily it should be right, my best services will be still at your brother-in-law's disposal."

"You will instruct counsel to defend him as a prisoner in the dock, you mean?" said Amy.

Her face was white, her voice was hard; there was a look of mingled reproach and agony in her tone, which it was hard indeed for him to face.

"Let us hope that will not be necessary, Amy."

"I see how it is," she answered slowly. "You

have no more hope than faith. Well, Sabey and I are still left to him, and perhaps—for these things stagger one—there is a good God to help us.”

“I have just told you, Amy, that all that man can do for Matthew I will do.”

“No, sir. He does not need the help of men like you,” she answered coldly. “Nor do *we* need it.”

“Amy!” He uttered her name with gentle reproach, and strove to take her hand.

She withdrew it, not quickly, but with marked decision, and stepped back.

“No, Mr. Barlow, I cannot take your hand. With Mr. Durham it is different. He has been always, until now, a friend to Matthew. I will endeavour to think of him as in the past—that past which contains all that is left to us of solace.”

“‘Mr. Barlow!’ you call me, and ‘I will not take your hand!’” repeated the young man in amazement. “Are you mad, Amy?”

“No, I am not mad, though things have happened that may well make me doubt of my own sanity. I should be mad indeed—or base indeed—if I thought of you any more as I used to think. You shall never be disgraced through me, sir.”

“That could never be, Amy,” he answered earnestly.

“Nay, you are too delicate, Mr. Barlow; it is my duty, however, to be plain with you. If Matthew is a thief, no honest man should wed his sister—for he is as near and dear to me as any brother of my blood could be.”

"And what care I?" broke in the young fellow impatiently.

"Yes, but I *do* care," returned Amy quickly. "If I could stoop so low as to be your wife upon such terms, I could not be your friend. Matthew Helston may be lost for ever, but his honour remains with me a sacred trust. I will join hands with none who doubt it. Affection, gratitude, justice, all forbid it. Henceforth we are strangers, sir."

"You never loved me!" exclaimed the young fellow vehemently.

"Did I not?" she answered, with a bitter smile. "Then my heart deceived me. If it be so, so much the better for us both."

"And you can speak to me like that? O Amy!"

There was a reproach in his voice as deep as hers, and far more tender. It would have astonished his partner in the City to have seen Mr. Frank Barlow at that moment, and would have greatly shaken his professional confidence in him.

"I did not mean to be unkind," she answered gently. "But I must speak the truth. If Matthew is a thief"—it was strange with what persistence she repeated this hateful phrase, as though it had some morbid attraction for her—"so help me Heaven, I will never marry you."

He looked at her a moment with despairing eyes, then suddenly their expression altered—it grew fierce and wolfish.

"But perhaps you will marry somebody else?"

"I! What does he mean? Sir, I am not quite

myself," she added pitifully. "I do not understand you."

"It is no matter," he said, with a deep flush; "I was not quite myself, perhaps, either. I will leave you for the present, Amy."

"For the present, and for ever, Mr. Barlow," she answered quickly. "I do not wish—I could not bear it—to see your face again. All is over between you and me. It is not only that," she added hastily, seeing he was about to speak; "I will not endure the presence of anyone (if I can help it) who thinks as you think of Matthew. It would be treason to him."

It was curious to see how, when she spoke of her brother-in-law, the strength and firmness which had failed her when she spoke of herself seemed to return to her. She was firm now, and pointed to the door with a steady hand.

Twice Mr. Barlow essayed to speak, and twice altered his intention; at last, with a deep sigh, he moved slowly out of the room, and closed the door behind him. His hat and coat hung in the hall, and he put them on like one in a dream and left the house.

"Had she ever really loved him?" was the question he was putting to himself all the time.

If he could have looked into the chamber he had just left, he would have found his answer.

Having locked the door, Amy sank down in the nearest chair, and, hiding her face in her hands, burst into the first passionate tears she had shed since her childhood. "Oh, Matthew, Matthew!" she

sobbed, "you have not done that which even good men lay to your charge, but you have broken your sister's heart."

CHAPTER XVII.

ANOTHER PARTING.

SELF-SACRIFICE would doubtless be thought more of but for the pretence that is made to it by anything but self-sacrificing persons. One might as well say that because there are professional beggars there are no deserving poor. Like charity, it does not commend itself; in some cases, there may be even no record of it save in the Book of Life—a work unread even by posterity.

Under no circumstances, I think, would Amy Thurlow have informed Sabey that all was over—and for Sabey's sake—between herself and her lover. But as matters were, and since the disclosure must needs reveal also the cause of separation, she never dreamt of making it. How could she say, "My Frank believes your Matthew to be dishonest, and is therefore mine no more"?

On the other hand, she could only hope to conceal it for a brief space. Sabey, though bowed down by so great a weight of sorrow, had still her sympathies for others. "Where is Frank? Why does not Frank come here as usual?" were questions she was sure to ask sooner or later; and how should she be answered?

It was bad enough for Amy to feel the tie between Uncle Stephen and herself strained to the uttermost; all the old cordiality gone, and in the place of it, on her part, a stern resentment, and on his, a pitiful deprecation of it.

On the evening of that last interview with Mr. Barlow she had told Mr. Durham, in as few words as possible, what had happened between them. It was absolutely necessary to do so to explain the young lawyer's absence from the house, and the old man had listened to her with a composure which, though she well knew it was far from indifference, had made her task comparatively easy.

"I foresaw all this, Amy," he answered quietly. "You tell me that there was nothing for you but to release him from an engagement which in his view of the case must involve disgrace to him. You do not tell me that there was another reason for your separation—but you had another."

"Do not press me for that, Mr. Durham."

"It is unnecessary, Amy, for I know it. You are silent upon it for my sake, because I am in the same condemnation as Frank himself. Only, because I am Matthew's uncle, and have loved him as a father loves his child, you are content in my case to overlook my transgression."

"Of course I can never forget what you have done for him, and for all of us, Mr. Durham."

He moved his hand in a deprecating manner. "That is little to the purpose now, my dear. May I ask whether Mr. Barlow made any explicit state-

ment to you regarding Matthew independently of what has passed between you and me?"

"He did not."

"Then you have cast off a man of honour, my dear girl; one in a thousand, one in ten thousand."

"Do you suppose I do not know that?" inquired she bitterly.

"Oh, Faith, Faith, how hard is the measure you exact from us poor mortals!" murmured Uncle Stephen. "The Gospel itself was not all good tidings; a man's foes, it says, shall for its sake be those of his own household. Husband against wife, and lover against sweetheart! As it was then, so it is now. But suppose it is not true, Amy?"

"The Gospel?"

"No; your faith in Matthew."

"To me, Mr. Durham, it is as true as Gospel; true as to one who lived in those times and saw the miracles and knew the Man. Pray do not let us two speak of this; it is bad enough to *feel* that we differ upon it."

So from that time they never spoke together—oh, sad companionship!—of the matter that was nearest to both their hearts and always in their minds.

The next morning, while Sabey and her sister were together, there came at Frank's usual hour—for he now always looked in before departing for the City—a ring at the door-bell. But Amy did not move.

"My darling, there is Mr. Barlow," said Sabey softly.

The tears were in her eyes that morning, though they were very rarely there. For the Christmas bells were ringing through the frosty air and awakening terrible recollections. That "sorrow's crown of sorrows," the remembrance of happier days, was pressing hard upon her. The world without was putting on its gayest garments. Poor was the heart indeed that was not to rejoice that day; but none so poor as hers.

"Mr. Barlow will not come to-day, Sabey."

"Why not?" she asked with quick anxiety; for the other's voice had something strange in it. "There is nothing wrong between you?—no quarrel?"

"No, darling; no quarrel. But he is not coming here any more."

"Not coming? What do you mean, Amy?" she exclaimed excitedly. "If he has lost you, it must be my doing. Oh, I see what it is: you have been too full of sorrow for me and Matthew. Men cannot bear a divided allegiance, and you have chosen between him and me, to your own ruin."

Sabey's agitation and distress were so extreme that, although it had been Amy's intention to put forward some such reason (though in a greatly modified form) as had suggested itself to her sister, to account for her estrangement from her lover, she cried out, "No, Sabey; no, indeed, you have nothing to reproach yourself with."

"Then, what can it be that has come between you? If you have not sent him away for my sake, it cannot be for your own. Oh, Amy, is it possible that Frank is jealous?"

Amy bowed in assent, for she dared not trust herself to speak. It was true that Frank was jealous; and at all events it was better that her sister should imagine that to be the cause of their parting than that she should seek further for it.

"How sad of him! how mad of him!" exclaimed Sabey. "I could never have believed such a thing of Frank. It must be all explained and made up at once. I myself will go to him. He cannot refuse to listen to poor me."

"No, dearest, no; it is no use," said Amy gravely.

"No use?" cried Sabey. "I will not believe it. Things cannot be so bad as that. Oh, Amy! I have lost my darling through no fault of his or mine. I adjure you—I who know what loss is—not to let pride or pique, or the resolve to own that you have done nothing wrong—though I know you have not—stand between you and the man you love. Of course he is mistaken; it is his devotion to you that has led him astray. Forgive him; forget all that rankles in your mind. Let me be your ambassador; I can plead for another, though I am weary of pleading for myself; and, Amy, it is my duty to do so. For though you say I am not to blame, yet it was through Matthew that Mr. Signet—for that is the man, of course—first entered this house. Oh, do not let this new misery lie at Matthew's door."

She spoke with such force and passionate entreaty as was a marvel to behold, in one of so slight a frame, and weakened by so many days and nights of bitterest woe.

Amy was deeply moved, while her embarrassment was greatly increased by her sister's line of argument, since it led, although by accident, to the very point she had wished her to avoid. The cause of Amy's misery did lie at Matthew's door, which her scruples for the truth prevented her from denying pointblank.

Fortunately, at this moment the maid entered. "If you please, miss, Mr. Signet has called, and wishes to see you on very particular business."

"Very good; tell him I will be with him immediately," said Amy.

But when the maid had gone, "You must not go," said Sabey. "I will see Mr. Signet instead of you. Of course there is no harm in your seeing him, but Frank will think so. The breach between you must not be widened."

"No, Sabey, no," returned the other resolutely. "Mr. Signet has a right to see me, and alone. We have a little secret together."

"A secret?" interrupted Sabey.

"Nothing, dear, that anyone can be jealous about," continued Amy, with a sad smile. "I will never see him again save in your presence, I promise you that; but this one time I must."

"Does Frank know of this secret?" inquired Sabey gravely.

"He does, darling; nothing can alter what I have been talking to you about, but Frank does know."

Sabey spoke no more, but sat with that dazed look which sometimes now came over her, and which

one sees on the faces of poor children in the street, whose only mother, Misfortune, has given them, for their dowry, a premature sense of life's burthen, without the knowledge of its nature; to whom sorrow is as the love of God to happier souls—past understanding. Amy pressed one passionate kiss upon her forehead and hurried out of the room.

Mr. Signet had come, no doubt, she thought, about the matter of the reward he was intending to offer for the discovery of Matthew in reply to Lady Pargiter's cruel insult. Under such circumstances it might have been expected that the jeweller would have worn a look of self-satisfaction, but his appearance was far otherwise. He looked pale and anxious and agitated.

"Dear Miss Amy, I have bad news," were his first words.

"We are used to that in this house," she answered bitterly. "If you had good news, I should say, 'Break it gently'; but, as it is, there is no fear. What is it?"

"Well, that is as good a way to look at it, perhaps, as under the circumstances is possible, my dear young lady. We now know the worst, that's all."

"Then, Matthew is dead?" She had overrated her strength, and felt the room go round with her as she put the question; her hand mechanically sought the wall to support herself. But when the jeweller hurried forward to offer her his assistance, she waved him off with an expression that was almost one of loathing. "I am better now," she

said in a low but resolute tone. "I can bear the truth; what is it?"

"Well, I am very sorry—sorry for myself, of course; but, if you will only believe it, Miss Amy, ten times more sorry for you—but it's all up about Mr. Helston. He is not dead; no, no, not that."

"Thank heaven, thank Heaven!" murmured Amy.

"But they have brought it home to him about the jewels. He is in Paris, trying to sell them. He has been seen there."

"It is false!" cried Amy.

"My dear young lady, it is true. There can be no two opinions about the matter. I have it from Sir Charles Pargiter's own mouth. This is how it happened. I advertised the reward, as agreed upon, giving it to her in Moor Street pretty stiff, as you may see—it's in the paper here—and I also printed some placards. One of them was left at her door last evening in return for her kind attention to Mrs. Helston. It fell into the hands of Sir Charles, it seems, who came round to me in person. He is not a bad sort, taking him all round, and he hates his wife like poison. 'Now, look here, Signet,' he says, 'you and I have no quarrel together.' (As indeed we have not, for, between ourselves, I have done him a good turn in my time.) 'Well, I have seen that precious placard of yours, which has driven my lady half-frantic. You are running your head against a stone wall, my friend. The murder's out.' 'Murder?' said I. 'You don't mean to say poor Helston is murdered?' 'Not he,' says he; 'he's alive enough,

and in Paris. My friend Major Lovell——' Do you know that name, Miss Thurlow?"

"I know the name," said Amy, breathing hard, and with her hand upon her heart to still its beating.

"I thought so. He had something to do with some young person—name of Mayson—had he not? Well, this man has seen Helston, and in her company."

"It is false; the man has lied," said Amy vehemently.

Mr. Signet shook his head and smiled, half-roguishly, half-pityingly. "No, my dear young lady, it is unfortunately true. These things will happen in the best regulated—I mean, in the most unexpected quarters. I will do Brail the justice to say that he always thought it was so. So far as the diamonds are concerned—I mean, who has got them—the whole thing is at an end."

"Then, why are you come here," inquired Amy sternly.

"Nay, you should not ask that," returned the jeweller reprovingly. "I was in hopes, my dear young lady, that you might have guessed why. The jewels, I say, are gone, I am afraid irrevocably; and it is I who will have to bear the loss. Twenty-five thousand pounds is a large sum for any man to pay out of pocket. But it won't ruin Star and Signet. No, not if it had been three times as much. As the diamonds are without doubt in Helston's possession, Lady Pargiter is no longer responsible for their loss, and she has no more interest in prosecuting him. It

is I, in fact, who become the prosecutor. Now, I don't mean to prosecute Matthew Helston. Can you guess why?"

"Indeed, sir, I cannot," answered Amy slowly. She experienced a difficulty in collecting her thoughts, like one who has but just recovered from some physical blow. "Matthew is no more guilty of this crime, Mr. Signet, than I am. I don't care what Major Lovell says, nor what any man says; nor would I believe an angel from Heaven—who would, however, only seem like one, for he must have been sent from the Father of Lies to say such things; nevertheless, I admit that, from your point of view, you are acting with great generosity. You wish to spare us; you would forbear to add another weight to the load it has pleased God to lay upon my poor sister."

"I am not thinking of your sister, Miss Amy," returned the jeweller frankly, "though of course I am sorry for her. What I wish to say is, that I am prepared to forego my claim upon the missing jewels—though I need not say I would recover them if I could; to abstain from taking any proceedings against your brother-in-law; and, in a word, to hush up this unfortunate matter, in return for just one little word from your lips. You are astonished, my dear young lady, I see. Perhaps you thought that a man in my position cares for money only, whereas, for my own part, I only care for what it brings; for it does bring things, and good things. I hope you will learn to like me for myself a little; but unless there had been some difference between our posi-

tions in that way I should not have ventured to thus address you, there being such considerable disproportion in another. I need say no more on that head, for you are sharpness itself; that is one of the many things for which I admire you, my dear Miss Amy; you are so intelligent—indeed, in every way so desirable—and, I am sure, a perfect lady. Perhaps you think that I should repent at some future time having cast in my lot with one who has the misfortune to be connected with—ahem!—there is no need to pursue that subject; I can only say that, if your hesitation arises from that consideration, it becomes you.”

“It does not arise from any such source, Mr. Signet,” returned Amy firmly. “If I have seemed to hesitate to reply to you, it was for your own sake: I have been endeavouring to place myself in your position; my difficulty has been to persuade myself that you had no intention of insulting me.”

“Bless my soul!” exclaimed Mr. Signet.

“I acquit you of any such purpose, sir,” she continued. “You could not have understood my position; nay, more, I perceive that I ought to be grateful to you, that you have proposed to yourself a self-sacrifice which I ought to appreciate. My unhappy circumstances must be my excuse for not entertaining that feeling. It is not that, however, which prevents me from accepting what I understand to be your offer of marriage; under no possible circumstances could I accede to it.”

“You surprise me very much indeed,” said Mr.

Signet. "If you would but take time to think about it——"

"On the contrary," interrupted Amy, "I shall endeavour to forget it. I may have surprised you, but I cannot have distressed you, Mr. Signet. And for my own part, I can only thank you for a compliment misplaced."

How it was Amy left the room, Mr. Signet never quite understood; he only knew that he suddenly found himself alone in it, mopping his forehead with a pocket-handkerchief.

"'A compliment!'" he murmured. "What the deuce did she mean by that? Twenty-five thousand pounds as good as gone, and the girl gone too! And she talks of compliments! Never in all my life was I connected with a speculation so disastrous. There must be something, surely, to the *per contra*." It was his sanguine habit to believe this whenever anything went wrong with him in trade. "Perhaps there's madness in the family; that's it!—she's mad. She must be mad to have refused a man like me. In which case, I've had a lucky escape."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. BARLOW TAKES ACTION.

MR. FRANK BARLOW had as cheerful a way of regarding his disappointments in business as Mr. Samuel Signet; neither was he deficient in egotism; but what placed him at a great disadvantage as compared with the jeweller was that he was unable to regard a matter of the affections as a business transaction. He was not of a romantic turn of mind; he had never addressed a sonnet to his mistress's eyebrows, nor, indeed, ever written a word of poetry in his life; he was, in fact, in most respects, of a conventional type; but he was capable of intense emotion. He could not, of course, in this particular compete with persons of the Byronic temperament, but his feelings were more lasting; he had not, like them, the power of transferring his affections from one object to another; when Polly gave him the cold shoulder, he could not take up with Jenny. His love, like that of a woman, was personal; and when Amy Thurlow rejected him, he felt as forlorn and desolate as a maiden of six-and-thirty who has been jilted.

Even when hope revived within him—as, being but six-and-twenty, it was bound to do—it was still directed to the same goal. Dinnerless and supperless, he had gone over by his solitary fire all that Amy had said; and again, sleepless on his couch, he had revised all the circumstances of his position.

That Matthew Helston was guilty of stealing Lady Pargiter's diamonds he could not doubt; and Amy had said that she would have no relations—not even those of friendship—with anyone who held that opinion. But sooner or later she herself could not fail to be convinced of his guilt, when, of course, this interdict must lose its force. Again, she had declared, if her brother-in-law was proved to have committed the crime in question, that she would never consent to ally herself with an honest man. A quixotic determination which time perhaps might modify, and especially if some other agent could be found to work with it. He could not earn her gratitude by proving Matthew innocent, but he might do so, perhaps, by saving him from the consequences of his crime, and still more by inducing him to make reparation for it.

In Matthew, then, strange so say, Mr. Barlow's hope was placed; and, once having a material object in view, he was not a man to lose time in taking action.

The next morning he despatched a letter to his partner explaining that important private affairs would necessitate for a few days his absence from office; and having packed his portmanteau, he called a hansom and drove—of all places in the world—to Mr. Signet's establishment in Paulet Street. The jeweller was not at home, having, in fact, just started for Cavendish Grove; but Mr. Brail happened to be in the inner room (as usual, with his eyes and ears open), and came out to him at once, on hearing him give his name to the shopman.

"Just come in here a moment, Mr. Barlow," he said, leading the way into the inner apartment. "You are come about the Helston affair, of course?"

Mr. Barlow nodded assent.

"Ah! then you have not seen Mr. Signet, I conclude; he has just gone up your way."

"No, I have not seen him."

"Well, he has taken bad news with him. The whole thing has burst" (he said "bust") "up. Sir Charles Pargiter was here last night—as a friend—to warn us that we were only throwing good money after bad in defending Mr. Helston's character."

"Indeed!" said Mr. Barlow coolly; "that was a strange step for Sir Charles to take."

"No doubt; as a lawyer, you would necessarily see that. Nevertheless, I have no doubt it was all on the square. Helston has been seen in Paris in company with a young woman—an old flame of his."

"Who saw him?"

"One Major Lovell, an old flame of *hers*."

"Which suggests motive for his statement," observed the lawyer.

"It would under ordinary circumstances, of course; but I do not think so in this case. I was here when Sir Charles arrived, and saw the Major's letter. It seems to me to express a certain regret that he should be the means of bringing Helston's offence home to him. *'My friendship for you and Lady Pargiter, against whom such infamous insinuations have been directed with regard to this affair,'* he says, *'compels me to disclose what I know. Hel-*

ston is in Paris with Phæbe Mayson, and has been endeavouring to dispose of the diamonds. This is certain, for I have seen her."

"Those are his very words, are they?" inquired Mr. Barlow.

"You can see for yourself. I had the opportunity of taking a note of them." And Mr. Brail handed his little memorandum-book to the lawyer for his inspection.

"I don't read anything here about seeing the young woman in Helston's company," said Mr. Barlow drily.

"True; Sir Charles no doubt jumped to that conclusion. It's a flaw, however. And there is still the matter of Lady Pargiter's not having Helston's receipt left unexplained. If they can prove, nevertheless, what is said here, that he is trying to sell the diamonds, our last chance, of course, is over. But I think Mr. Signet is too precipitate in throwing up the sponge. However, he is the master, and has so settled it."

"Is Mr. Signet going to do nothing further, then?"

"Nothing. If things had been permitted to take their proper course, I should have been in Paris by this time. But there are wheels within wheels."

"Mr. Signet does not wish to prosecute, I suppose?" observed Mr. Barlow, speaking as indifferently as he could, but growing very red.

Mr. Brail laid his forefinger to his nose. "That's it," he said. "In my opinion, we should never let

private sentiments interfere with business matters; but that is his affair."

"And is no attempt to be made to recover the diamonds?"

Mr. Brail shrugged his shoulders. "I have no instructions to that effect, though every hour lost diminishes our chances exceedingly. I shall do my best, however, to persuade Mr. Signet to offer a reward for them."

"There can be no harm in that," assented Mr. Barlow. "The fact is, I am off to Paris to-day for the very purpose of recovering these diamonds; and if you will help me to get them, and we succeed, the reward shall be yours."

"You mean that we shall go halves?"

"Not at all; I don't want the money; my object, I frankly tell you, is to get this unhappy man to make restitution."

"Very right and very proper, I'm sure," said the detective. "Your feelings do you honour. It's a matter of a thousand pounds, though," he added drily, "for neither Lady Pargiter nor Mr. Signet have yet withdrawn their offers for the discovery of Mr. Helston himself."

"That I have nothing to do with," answered the lawyer; "I am not a thief-catcher."

"I mean no offence, Mr. Barlow. I have known many gentlemen who have had a taste that way; though I agree with you it is not to their credit. The amateur has no right to take the bread out of the mouth of the professional. It would be very hard, you would think, if any gent took up your

own line, for example, for mere love of it, and gave good law, free, gratis, for nothing, to their fellow-creatures."

"It would be a most unprecedented infringement of etiquette," observed Mr. Barlow with natural indignation.

"Just so. Well, what can I do for you in this matter, sir?"

"Three things: I want one of those photographs which Mr. Signet has taken from the portrait of Mr. Helston; I want an accurate drawing of the missing diamonds; and I want Major Lovell's address in Paris. In return for these favours I promise to hand over to you any reward Mr. Signet may be induced to offer for the jewels, if I am so fortunate as to recover them."

"Well, sir, of course it's a little irregular," observed Mr. Brail hesitatingly, "but in the interests of my employer—and on the understanding you have mentioned—I feel I should do wrong to refuse you. Perhaps you wouldn't object to sign a little memorandum?"

"I will sign nothing," said Mr. Barlow peremptorily. "I do not wish my name to appear in any transaction respecting Mr. Helston; and I am not accustomed to have my word doubted."

"Pray don't imagine that, my dear sir," said Mr. Brail with precipitation. "I have every confidence in you, I am sure; and besides," he added naively, "there is no option. I think I know where to lay my hands upon the photograph and the drawing—

in fact, here they are—and the Major is staying at the Louvre Hotel.”

“Thanks. Now, is there anything, Mr. Brail, that your experience can suggest as to my method of procedure?”

“Well, in these cases one can draw no ground-plan; one must act according to circumstances. If you were familiar with the appearance of the young lady who, as I always suspected (though I have not the advantage of her acquaintance), was at the bottom of this matter, then indeed——”

“I have got her photograph in my pocket,” interrupted Mr. Barlow.

“Indeed!” exclaimed Mr. Brail, with a genuine note of admiration. His face for once expressed his feelings, and what it said was, “‘You are by no means the fool I took you for.’ Just let me look at it.”

Mr. Barlow placed it in his hand.

“I have seen this young lady before,” murmured the detective.

“Where? Under what circumstances?”

“Ah, there you puzzle me. I never forget a face, but I see a good many of them, and cannot always find the place to suit it. I don’t know where I have seen her; but I am afraid it was not in church. Well, if you find her, you will find Helston. I wish I was in your shoes,” he sighed, looking fondly at the photograph.

“Your gallantry, sir, is very much out of place,” observed Mr. Barlow sternly. This respectable young fellow, who felt himself in a false posi-

tion in this affair from first to last, was genuinely scandalised.

"Gallantry!" exclaimed Mr. Brail. "Pooh, pooh, sir! you quite mistake me. What I meant was that, if it was I who had the business in hand, I could make this lady useful. If I can read faces, she is fickle. For a fifty-pound note she would sell the gentleman."

"Oh, I see," said Mr. Barlow, at least as much in disgust as in apology; "I have no wish, however, to buy him."

"Very true. But if she would sell the man, how much more would she make some bargain about the diamonds—that is, if they are not already disposed of! Mr. Barlow, it may be of importance to you to have some one in London on whom you can rely to take immediate action, if any need for action should arise. This is my professional address, where a telegram will reach me at all hours. I wish I was going with you, or even without you. I should go on my own hook but that I make it a rule never to take up a case which my employer has thought fit to abandon. Your game will be a little difficult, no doubt; but that only adds to the pleasure of winning it; and even if you lose it, well, you will have had the pleasure of the play. Good-bye to you, sir, and good luck!"

"Good-bye," returned Mr. Barlow, somewhat ruefully.

In spite of the attractions attributed to it by Mr. Brail, he would very gladly have handed over his errand to that gentleman, if only it could have

been effected by deputy. Even at the very best—that is, if he should discover Helston and meet him face to face—the prospect was a most unpleasant one. The last time he had met him had been at Helston's table as his guest and friend. It had been his dearest wish to become connected with him by a closer tie. The man had now disgraced himself and all belonging to him, and the best that could be hoped for was that he might be found willing to make reparation. But in any case, how embarrassing must be their meeting! As Mr. Brail had hinted, it would also probably be necessary for him to make acquaintance with this disreputable young woman; and even Major Lovell himself was by no means an individual with whom he would voluntarily have held intercourse. If the matter had been a professional one, of course, he would have known how to deal with it; but as things stood he would be so hampered in his actions by private considerations that he could form no plan of proceeding beforehand. Moreover, though that was a comparatively small thing, Mr. Barlow had received an exceptionally good English education; so that, though he could have quoted Horace from the original where Mr. Signet could only have cited "The Handbook of Quotations," he knew nothing whatever of the French language. "The Continent" was, therefore, as "dark" to him as that of Africa was to its latest explorer, nor had he a faithful native to guide his steps and interpret his ideas. This, it may be thought, was a small thing to a man who had such important interests at stake, and

whose future happiness might depend upon the result of his mission. But such was not the case. One has only to be taken ill, or to have some dear one taken ill, or to receive some summons that requires instant attention, or, in short, to be affected in any serious way, when out of one's own country, to appreciate the infinite inconvenience of that circumstance, and how its small but incessant embarrassments increase one's troubles. And if that happens to those even who are masters of the modern languages (like you and me, reader), how much more must it oppress those ignorant of all tongues but their own!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAWYER AND THE MAJOR.

It was before the days of twin-ships and of the *Calais-Douvres* that Mr. Frank Barlow took his departure to Paris by way of Folkestone; but even if those admirable scientific inventions had been in existence it is doubtful whether they would have much availed him against the effects of a sea voyage. His nature was averse to range, and he had never tempted the waves before except in the floating bridge between Gosport and Portsmouth; and we all know what the ocean does with a newcomer. It receives him much as a midshipman's mess in old times was wont to receive one from his mother's apron-strings. When Mr. Barlow set foot

on Boulogne shores he was in that pitiable state that he almost made up his mind to take out letters of naturalisation and become a Frenchman for ever—more rather than recross the Straits. Nor at the buffet of the railway station did he find anything better adapted to recover the tone of his stomach than ratafia cakes, small sticks of chocolate, and very large cruet-bottles of vinegar and oil. Soup, indeed, he contrived to procure; but as it consisted—no, it had no consistence, as it was obviously composed of hot water with melted butter in it—it benefited him very little.

Years afterwards, when speaking of this unique experience (for he never left his native land again), Mr. Barlow was wont to remark that, though in foreign travels he often saw in the flesh what had apparently been boiled for soup, he never beheld those soups which those rags at some remote period must have made. On that long, uninteresting route to Paris it also struck him how very few English folks could ever be got to take it, and how they would inveigh against its tedium, if it only happened to be in England. At one station he was so fortunate as to procure some oranges, the only food familiar to him, and therefore in which he had any confidence, at half a franc apiece. But the pangs of hunger compelled him subsequently to procure some little cakes, which turned out to be made of the same substance that is used at home for giving to dead rabbits the powerful aroma that fits them to be a "drag" for a pack of hounds. Suffering, then, from a distressing combination of aniseed and

mal de mer, and we may add *mal du pays*, Mr. Frank Barlow arrived in Paris and took up his quarters at the Louvre. He was not sorry to find that Major Lovell was for the present elsewhere, since an opportunity for recruiting himself was thus afforded him; and having taken advantage of it, and addressed a short note to the Major requesting an interview upon a subject of importance, he awaited events with his usual confidence and serenity of mind.

The same evening he received a few lines from the Major expressing his willingness to see him, and was at once ushered to his apartment on the third floor.

It was scarcely possible for two men of the same race, age, and position in life, to have fewer things in common with one another than Frederick Lovell and Frank Barlow. With the latter we are already acquainted: an uncompromisingly honest fellow, devoted to his profession and his mistress; strictly moral, and genuinely though unenthusiastically religious; a very favourable specimen, on the whole, of the middle class to which he belonged. Socially the two men stood nearly on the same level, but the surroundings of the Major had from the first been of a more aristocratic kind; his parents had died early, and he had been placed by his uncle and guardian at a public school, and from it at once entered the army. He had had therefore very little education, while he had been left to himself altogether as to moral training. His father had been a man of fashion, and used to be known in

circles of which Barlow *père* had known nothing, as "Caterpillar Lovell." The sobriquet arose from his possession of an insect of that description which he was wont in the days of the Regency, when such eccentric bets were common, to back for a great deal of money to escape from a soup-plate, in the centre of which it had been placed, more quickly than any other caterpillar. The pretty creature was a fortune to him, until someone discovered that its celerity arose from the fact of the plate being a warmed one; when that source of revenue ceased.

He left little behind him; but Frederick had great expectations from his uncle, a bachelor and a man of science. His weakness was astronomy, and he possessed the largest telescope and the tallest observatory in his native county. When important transits were expected, his lawn used to be laid out with pegs and ropes in illustration of the phenomena about to take place in the celestial regions. On one occasion, when Master Frederick was at home for the holidays, he disturbed these scientific arrangements to make room for a game at bowls, and in replacing them mixed up Jupiter and Venus in a very compromising and improper manner. This interference with the stars and their courses cost him his inheritance. The greater part of his uncle's wealth went to endow scientific research, while he himself remained a poor man with expensive tastes, and little beyond his good looks and captivating manners wherewith to make his way in the world. Nevertheless, he had never ridden in an omnibus, nor stayed at an hotel, even in Paris, without in-

dulging himself in a private sitting-room. He was in his own apartment now, lying on the sofa, with a cigarette in his mouth and *La Vie Parisienne* in his hand, when his visitor was announced. He rose at once, with an inclination of his head that contrasted very favourably with the other's stiff and embarrassed bow, and motioned him to a seat.

"Mr. Barlow, I believe?"

"Yes; I have ventured to call upon you on a matter of great importance, and about which, as I understand through Sir Charles Pargiter, you can give me information. It is with respect to Matthew Helston."

A flush came over the Major's somewhat delicate and pallid features. "Do you come on Sir Charles's behalf?" he inquired.

"No, sir; I do not. I am a lawyer." He hesitated for an instant.

The Major bowed with even greater courtesy than before, but also with more coldness. His experience of gentlemen of the long robe (and he did not understand the nice distinctions of the legal profession) had been very unfavourable.

"My object in coming to Paris, Major Lovell, is in the first place to discover the whereabouts of Mr. Helston; and in the next place to recover the missing diamonds."

"You are acting on instructions from Mr. Signet, I suppose?" returned the other. "However, that makes little matter, as from a note I got from Sir Charles this evening it seems their interests are now identical. Well, I'm sorry I can't assist you, Mr.

Barlow. I do not know where Mr. Helston is, and need not say that I am in equal ignorance as to the diamonds."

"And yet I understood that you had seen Mr. Helston."

"No, sir, I have not; and, to speak frankly, if I had I should not feel justified in giving you any information respecting him. You will say, perhaps, that it is the duty of every man to further the ends of justice. I do not dispute it; but I also claim to exercise the right of private judgment. I cannot oblige you in this matter."

"You speak of private judgment," said Mr. Barlow; "may I inquire if it is not some private and personal feeling which is actuating you in thus refusing to assist me? I am aware—though, as I believe, you are strangers to each other—that years ago circumstances brought you into a certain connection with Matthew Helston."

"They may or may not have done so, sir," answered the other, haughtily, "but at all events they afford no subject of discussion with a stranger."

"Still, though I have read that when one man has wronged another it is a temptation to him to do him further hurt, I can scarcely imagine any person of honourable feeling who, finding his defeated rival under foot, would designedly assist in crushing him. I am here, I confess, as Matthew Helston's friend. I wish to do the best I can—which, alas! can be but very little—for him. If I could see him, I could, perhaps, persuade him to make some amends for the offence he has committed. At all events, I

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should know that he was alive, whereas at present his unhappy wife knows not whether he is above ground or not, and suffers extreme anxiety and distress of mind."

"Will you swear to me," interrupted the Major suddenly, "that this and no other is the reason of your making these inquiries? That you have no motive, such as that offer of reward offered by Lady Pargiter, or as instructions from her, or from Mr. Signet, and no covert intention of doing the man an ill turn?"

"So help me Heaven I have not, Major Lovell," returned Mr. Barlow earnestly. "When I tell you that my dearest hope, notwithstanding all that has happened, is to ally myself to one dear and near to him, you may imagine that I am the last person to do him an injury, or—whatever may be my respect for the laws of my country—to bring him to justice."

"In that case, Mr. Barlow," returned the Major gravely, "what information I am possessed of is very much at your service; but it will, I fear, be of small advantage to you. You, however, will be the best judge of that, and therefore I will simply set before you all I know."

"Would you kindly let me have pen and ink?" said the lawyer.

Whereupon Mr. Barlow was accommodated with those familiar articles, though in a shape under which he scarcely recognised them; the ink-bottle being an egg in a bird's nest, and the quill pen having beads on its feather and a tassel on its tip.

"I have seen Mr. Helston but twice in my life,

and each time only for a few seconds," began the Major; "but, from circumstances to which you have alluded, the tidings that he had disappeared with Lady Pargiter's jewels aroused a greater interest in my mind than it otherwise would have done. I should say, by-the-by, that I was present on one occasion when Lady Pargiter, as it seemed to me, treated him with great indignity, and I pitied the man; and though afterwards he expressed pleasure at a certain misfortune that befell me—it was the loss of a bet—I owed him no grudge on that account, for I felt that he had good cause to be hostile to me. This bet I had made with one Captain Langton; and since it was in his presence that Helston in a manner insulted me——"

"One moment, Major Lovell," interrupted Mr. Barlow. "How was it that Helston met you in Captain Langton's company?" That he should have done so struck the lawyer as remarkable, and even suggested that Helston might have had acquaintances, such as his friends and family had no idea of, all along.

"Well, the whole thing happened in a moment. We stopped him in his cab one night, thinking him a perfect stranger, in order to decide a bet—rather Langton did."

"Bless my soul!" murmured Mr. Barlow, to whom this proceeding appeared outrageous.

"And that was why," continued the Major, "though I should have been silent upon the subject to people in general, I spoke to Langton about Helston after the robbery."

"Then even at that early date, Major Lovell, you took it for granted he was guilty?"

"Well, it looked uncommonly fishy, of course, from the very first. I certainly never expressed any such opinion, nor indeed did Langton at that time. On the contrary, he suggested that Pargiter, being very hard up, might have laid hands on the diamonds himself."

"Not in earnest, surely?" said Mr. Barlow, very much scandalised.

"Well, half in joke, half in earnest. Langton is a very queer fellow. I spoke to him, as I now remember, about the robbery because he had at one time expressed a wish to see the diamonds, and knowing I was a friend of Pargiter's, had asked me to procure him the opportunity."

"And did you?"

"No; Langton is not the sort of man I should wish to introduce to a friend's house. I put him off with some excuse or another."

Discursive and apparently aimless as was the Major's statement, there was one portion of it which struck the lawyer's attention in a manner hardly explicable even to his own mind.

"You have hinted," he interposed, "that this Captain Langton is not a special friend of yours; may I ask what you know about him?"

"Well, it is very little; he is merely a cardroom acquaintance. He is an unpopular man amongst us; but then he is generally a winner, which may partly account for that. However, some men have a great objection to him—Sir Charles Pargiter has,

for one. I remember his saying at the club that he believed he must have committed a murder, and someone replying, 'So he has, but it was only at sea'—which for all I know may have been the case."

"Did you know of the robbery in Moor Street at that time?" inquired Mr. Barlow.

"Well, no; how could we? In fact, it must have been just then in course of commission."

"Did you speak to Captain Langton about it the next day?"

"No; he left England almost immediately, to spend his Christmas in Paris. Our conversation about Helston took place some time afterwards—just after Lady Pargiter had advertised the reward. He said it was offered too late, for that Helston had been in Paris for a week, and had no doubt by that time disposed of the jewels. He even named a diamond merchant in the Rue de Bris to whom he had offered them."

"But how came Captain Langton to know that?"

"I have no idea. Langton, however, is a man ready to do a stroke of business in anything; and in diamonds as likely as anything else; so that he may have visited the merchant on his own account. As I have said, he is a queer fish."

"And yet it was upon his testimony, it seems, that you wrote to Lady Pargiter to say that Helston was in Paris."

"No, not entirely," said the Major reddening and hesitating. "It is true I had not seen the man myself, but I had seen one the fact of whose presence

here—taking into consideration Langton's evidence—convinced me that it was so.”

“I do not quite follow you, Major Lovell. Pray forgive me if I seem to press you on what may be delicate ground; but the importance of this matter may be very great.”

“Well, the fact is I recognised a lady in the street as one to whom Mr. Helston when a very young man was deeply attached, and——”

“You mean Phoebe Mayson?”

“Yes; Langton told me (I don't know upon whose authority) that Helston had renewed his addresses to her; that they had, in fact, come to Paris in company. The whole story seemed so probable that I felt it my duty, since Mr. Signet was questioning his claim to compensation, to let Pargiter know how matters stood; but I did it, I do assure you, against the grain.”

“I am sure of that,” said Mr. Barlow earnestly. “You do not happen to know, of course, where the young person you spoke of is residing?”

“Most certainly not,” returned the Major, in a tone which might have been mistaken (by a stranger to him) for one of virtuous indignation, but which was in reality caused by wounded pride.

“But you can give me the name of the jeweller?”

“It is either Monteur or Montagne—Langton's French is very fishy—but the Rue de Bris is a short street, and you will have no difficulty in finding him.”

“I am greatly obliged to you, Major Lovell,” said Barlow, rising. “You have behaved most frankly.”

"Not at all, not at all," put in the Major. "You have my best wishes, not only for the recovery of the diamonds, but for helping your friend out of his scrape—'removing him from the jurisdiction of the Court' is, I believe, the technical expression. Good evening."

Under any other circumstances Mr. Barlow would have very warmly protested against a phrase which certainly imputed to him very unprofessional intentions; but he was too well satisfied with his companion's behaviour to find fault with him, and also too full of a certain thought which his narration had suggested to him, to take much note of minor matters. What had obtained possession of his mind was evidently a subject insignificant enough in the present connection in the Major's eyes, but which in those of the lawyer was growing every moment, though in a vague and dusky fashion, like the genius of the bottle in the Arabian tales; only the shape it took was by no means that of a genius, but of one Captain Langton—a man who had been anxious to get a sight of the Pargiter diamonds, and who, though tolerated, as it seemed, in certain circles of society, was credited with a murder, though only at sea. It was incredible, notwithstanding all that had happened to disturb Mr. Barlow's views respecting Helston's character, that such a man as this could have been a friend and still more a confidant of Matthew's. How came it, then, that he should profess to know, not only that he was in Paris, but that he was in possession of the diamonds, and endeavouring to dispose of them?

This weighty question in connection with certain possibilities contingent on it, and in combination, it may be added, with the eccentric and unaccustomed movements of the eider-down quilt with which his bed was provided, rendered Mr. Barlow's first night in Paris a very disturbed one.

CHAPTER XX.

MAKING INQUIRIES.

It is often stated by those who are good linguists, I scarcely know whether for the comfort of those to whom not only "the French of Paris is unknown," but even "that of Stratford atte Bowe," or for their disappointment and distraction, that "everybody in Paris speaks English." Or, if they shrink from telling a falsehood of that enormous magnitude, they will nevertheless confidently assert that there are plenty of people who understand English in the queen of cities, "wherever you go," and that in the hotels and shops, at all events, "you will be quite at home." They do not hint that the conversation of the poor islander during his stay on the Continent must necessarily be of the parrot and phrase-book kind, and that the best chance he will have of that interchange of ideas which is to "open his mind" so much will be with a waiter. Even with the waiters, however, poor Mr. Barlow did not find himself on a very intelligible footing, while his intercourse with the shopkeepers was like the first

rehearsal of a pantomime, in which he had always to sustain the part of pantaloon. The Rue de Bris he discovered, like a navigator, by means of a chart; but M. Monteur might have been M. Tonson, so difficult he found it to ascertain that gentleman's place of residence. He looked, of course, for a shop, never imagining that the place he sought was an hotel with a courtyard resembling a small edition of the Admiralty, in Whitehall; and when at last he had made his way thither, and found the proprietor—an ancient personage in a black velvet skull-cap, full of antics, and hung on springs, in a parlour at the back of his premises—he was not certain in his own mind whether he stood in the presence of a diamond merchant or a monkey. Upon the whole, indeed, since M. Monteur received him with native politeness—that is, with a profusion of shrugs and jabber—he rather leant to the latter view. As soon, however, as Mr. Barlow made his new acquaintance understand that he was an Englishman, “Ha, ha; ma fille shall come,” cried monsieur in an ecstasy; and on pulling the bell and giving some orders to the servant, a young lady—indeed, a mere school-girl—but of prepossessing appearance, presented herself to Mr. Barlow's astonished view. It appeared M. Monteur had a daughter who had resided in the Isle of Fogs and could speak its tongue like a native; and this was she.

After a few words of explanation from the old man, “You have beezness with my papa, monsieur?” said she in a sprightly tone. “Vaar good; you tell it to me, and I will tell it to him. Fire away.”

Mr. Barlow stared, as well he might; for the young lady, though obviously enjoying the task that had been set her, looked perfectly serious.

"I have ventured to call upon Monsieur Monteur," he said, "in respect to a matter which can hardly be called a business one, but to which, I hope, he will have the courtesy to give his attention. A gentleman in whom I am deeply interested has suddenly disappeared from his wife and family, to their great distress and perplexity, and I am come to Paris to find him. I have reason to believe that he called upon your father some days ago with respect to the purchase of some diamonds."

This statement having been translated to the merchant, he replied, through his daughter, that a countryman of Mr. Barlow's had, indeed, called upon him in the preceding week, but upon a private matter.

"Not if he knows it," said the young lady (but with a sweetly apologetic air, as though she had said, "Deeply as he regrets to refuse you"), will my father geef you any information about the matter unless you show some authority for demanding it."

At this Mr. Barlow was a good deal cast down, and his face showed it.

"Are you a relative of his who has quarrelled with him for cutting his stick?" inquired the young lady tenderly. She had cheek-bones so high that one really could not look over them to the extent of calling her a beauty, but she had soft eyes and a gentle voice; and if it were not for her inexplicable indulgence in slang Mr. Barlow would have pro-

nounced her essentially feminine. When French people spoke French they puzzled him, but the way in which this young woman spoke English amazed and even alarmed him beyond expression.

"I am not a relative of the person in question——" he began.

"Name of Butt," she put in with quickness but great gravity.

"Just so; but it is possible—I hope probable—that I may become connected with him."

"Ah" (lighting up with sudden vivacity), "you are going to marry his sister. Have you popped?"

This was worse than all; it seemed a positive sacrilege to Mr. Barlow to have his lost love spoken of in this flippant fashion; but then it was so necessary to secure this young person's sympathy.

"Yes, mademoiselle, I have—popped."

Whereupon mademoiselle clapped her hands delightedly, and, turning to her father, seemed to appeal to him in Mr. Barlow's favour. That gentleman, of course, did not understand what she said, but he afterwards compared her winning manner and caresses and flow of words to a rain of sugar-plums.

"My father says you must describe your brother-in-law that is to be," said she, "before he can furnish you with his address. My papa is a man of business, you see; moreover," she added in an apologetic tone, "there is no green in his eye. He is a young man from the country, but you cannot get over *him*."

"Indeed, my dear young lady, I do not wish to

get over him," protested Mr. Barlow. "My brother-in-law is a man about my own height; rather more stoutly built."

"Eh? Ah, I understand; and I, too, have seen him. Yes, he is stumpy, podgy."

"He has short brown hair, and his face is grave."

"Yes; that is right—a heavy spirit; or, as you say in England, down upon his luck. He looks as if he had lost sixpence."

"He has lost more than that," sighed Mr. Barlow. "If M. Monteur has still a doubt as to my personal knowledge of this gentleman, I think I can state the nature of the business about which he came. He wished to dispose of certain diamonds—like these." And he produced the drawing of the Pargiter *parure* which he had obtained from Mr. Brail.

The merchant took the drawing and examined it with curiosity. "Yes, that is right," he said in French; "we might have done business together, this gentleman and I, only I required certain explanations which were refused me. From what you tell me, my darling, it is probable that they were his wife's jewels, to which he had no claim. She must have been very wealthy. Well—well, I have sufficiently respected his desire for secrecy. Our visitor, it seems, has a right to what he asks. The gentleman's address was Hotel de la Fontaine, Rue du Simon."

"You are most kind, mademoiselle," said Barlow gratefully, when this news had been translated to

him. "You have made easy what would otherwise have been very difficult."

"Do not mention it, sir," returned she gracefully. "And do keep up your pecker. Look less like a duck in a thunderstorm, and never say die while there's a shot in the locker."

"Your advice is admirable, mademoiselle," said Mr. Barlow; then added, with an irrepressible curiosity, "But may I ask where you learnt your English?"

"Yes, yes; that is what everyone says," cried she exultingly. "'Where did I learn my English?' I speak like a native; is it not so?"

"Indeed you do, mademoiselle; more so, indeed, than most natives."

"Ah, that is thanks to my two cousins at Rugby College. They taught me the idioms all in the Christmas holidays, at the house of their mother. Yes, I speak *vaar* good English. Right you are. I believe you, my boy."

What could Mr. Barlow do? She was so perfectly unconscious of her linguistic defects, and so blissful in her possession of them, that it would have been a cruelty to undeceive her; he could only take her hand—having received the politest of bows from M. Monteur—and wish her good-bye, which he did most cordially.

"Ta, ta," she said with all the ingenuous delight of a child who is exhibiting its accomplishments; "ta, ta, and take care of yourself. Permit me to jerk the tinkler, and the slavey will show you the way out."

Mr. Barlow was deficient in humour, and serious

thoughts were oppressing him, yet he could not avoid being amused by this artless girl. The confidence which her father exhibited in her command of the English tongue, extending as it did even to matters of business, and the obvious pride he took in it, had tickled him in spite of himself. But when the *concierge* closed the house-door behind him, it seemed to shut him out from gaiety and good humour, from laughter and lightness of all kinds, for evermore. Attorney though he was, Mr. Barlow had a tender conscience, and he reproached himself for having given way even for a few moments to that sense of the ridiculous which is one of the few possessions of man unshared by the lower animals. The tidings he had just received, and of which he had been in search, were, indeed, full of gloom; and if he had ventured for some hours to entertain the glimmer of a certain hope, they had extinguished it. It was true that he had omitted to show M. Monteur the photograph of Matthew, but the verbal description he had given of him had evidently tallied but too well with the merchant's recollection of the man, whom, moreover, the assumed name of Butt identified beyond doubt with Helston.

And now he was about to be brought face to face with him in his infamy and disgrace; not to know the worst—for the worst he knew—but to awaken, if possible, in one whom he had once believed to be without reproach, some sense of his own ignominy, and to suggest, not amendment and repentance, for they were impossible, but a tardy and probably partial reparation.

It was curious, considering the whole situation, how much he thought of Matthew *per se*, and of the ruin he had brought upon himself as well as upon others. He had broken the law; he had sinned against morality; and committed, in short, every trespass calculated to awaken indignation in the mind of a man of Barlow's character; and yet he was unable to divest himself of a certain yearning pity for the man, as well as of a profound regret for his degradation. But of course Sabey and Amy occupied the chief share in his thoughts. What kind of message, he wondered, would he have to give them from this unhappy wretch, and how would he, the bearer of it, be received on his return? This last consideration, all-important as it was as respected his own interests, affected him, perhaps, just now the least. The Present loomed so large and gloomily in front of him that for the moment it shut out the Future.

He took a *fiacre* to the Rue du Simon, but alighted at the corner of the street. He felt a strange disinclination to precipitate matters, and preferred to pass house by house on foot till he came to the hotel of which he was in search. How would he feel, what would he know, thought he to himself, when he should issue from that door through which he was about to enter? Which of us has been so fortunate as not to have pictured to himself the like, and have imagined what the state of our mind will be to-morrow, or the next hour, or the next minute, after some important and perhaps painful ordeal? Have we not ourselves stood outside our mistress's

door, or our creditor's, or that of some other petty Providence of our fate, with similar feelings? Ay, and but too often with the same sad forebodings (God help us all) that, whatsoever change may be in store for us, it can hardly be for the better.

It was positively with some sense of relief, though Mr. Barlow had undertaken his journey for no other object than that which seemed to lie immediately before him, that he reflected that Matthew might not be at the Hotel de la Fontaine after all. When the reward for his apprehension had been made public was it not probable that he had changed the address given to the diamond merchant, and betaken himself to safer quarters? For though he could not be identified by means of the name he had assumed, he might be so by the jewels themselves.

The Hotel de la Fontaine was one of considerable pretensions, and it struck Mr. Barlow's practical mind that if Matthew Helston had resided there ever since his coming to Paris, one at least of the Par-giter diamonds must have been disposed of to defray his expenses. That he should have chosen so ambitious a place of residence at all was utterly inconsistent with his old habits of economy, but why should they have remained to him when every other rule of his life had been negatived and overturned?

The courtyard of the inn was open to the street, and over the left hand of the gate was the porter's lodge, to which Mr. Barlow at last advanced with a determined step and inquired for Mr. Butt. There was a board in the lodge containing the names of

the occupants of the hotel, with a star against those who had passed the gate that morning and left their names with the *concierge*.

Mr. Butt, it appeared, had done so, for that official (who could speak English) replied that Monsieur was not within.

"Do you know when he will return?" inquired Mr. Barlow.

The *concierge* did not know. As a rule Mr. Butt left the hotel after breakfast and did not return till midday. "Madame, however," he added, "was in as usual."

To Mr. Barlow, albeit far from an imaginative man, that "as usual" had a great significance. He read in it—that is, in the fact of her being usually left alone—a story of satiety and repentance. Matthew, he suspected, had already become tired of the object of his guilty passion, or had failed to find in it a Lethe balm against the stings of conscience.

"Did Monsieur wish to see Madame?"

The question startled him not a little, for among all the embarrassing positions that had presented themselves to his apprehension he had certainly never contemplated a *tête-à-tête* with Miss Phoebe Mayson.

Still, was it not possible that there had been a reciprocity of disillusion? That the girl might herself have repented of her bargain, and be not indisposed to release herself from such ties as bound her to the runaway? If he could persuade her so to do, it struck Mr. Barlow—though, it must be con-

fessed, with considerable vagueness—that he would be advancing Sabey's interest. In any case by an interview with this young woman he might obtain some information respecting Matthew's true position.

"Yes," he answered, with a sudden impulse, "I will see the lady."

Whereupon a waiter was summoned, who conducted him to Mr. Butt's apartments, which were on the third floor.

CHAPTER XXI.

WITH PHOEBE MAYSON.

HAVING brought Mr. Barlow to the door of No. 53, the waiter discreetly left him there to proceed as he thought fit, for which that gentleman hardly knew whether to be grateful or otherwise, the business on hand being such a very delicate one. However, the more he thought about it the less he felt very sure he was likely to like it, so he knocked gently with his knuckles. There was no answer, but he heard a rustle of silk, as of someone rising hastily from her chair; then he knocked again more sharply.

"Come in," said a female voice in English.

The next moment he stood in the same room with the speaker, but not face to face with her. She had been sitting, as he conjectured, by the door, but had hastily moved away at his summons and retired into a recess near the window, where she stood in shadow. A tall, slight woman, but of

shapely figure, with a great deal of fine brown hair—much lighter, it struck him, than Amy's—and a pair of beautiful eyes marred by tears. The tears were not standing in them, but had only just been swept away, and their traces, notwithstanding the precaution she had taken, were distinct enough to him.

"Your business, sir?" she inquired sharply, in a tone of annoyance rather than alarm, though she looked frightened also.

"It is with Mr. Butt," said Mr. Barlow.

"My husband is not in. Did they not tell you so at the gate?"

"Yes, madam; but they could give me no other information—such as when he would be likely to return, for example—so I ventured to come up."

"I know nothing of Mr. Butt's movements," she said stolidly. "If you have any message for him, however, you can leave it."

"Just so. That is what I wish to do. May I take it for granted that you are aware of his object in coming to Paris?"

She hesitated and changed colour; her eyes glanced round the little sitting-room, as if in search of something that might be lying on chair or table; then answered, "No, sir; I know nothing of Mr. Butt's business matters."

"You know at least, however, that the name he now passes under is not his real name?"

"That can scarcely be *your* business, sir," she replied haughtily, and drawing herself up to her full height. She was certainly very beautiful; more so

by far than her picture made her out to be, though at that moment, being *posée* and so far not herself, she resembled it more than at first. But its expression of gaiety and *abandon* was altogether absent from the original; she looked careworn, and wan and pale, except for the flush of anger that his question had called into her cheek.

"Pray forgive me if I appear rude, madam," continued Mr. Barlow. "My mission is so urgent."

"Still it can hardly concern *me*, sir," she put in.

"Pardon me, but it does, madam—at least partly. I am come here on behalf of one whom both of you have wronged, though not, indeed, in the same proportion."

"I have wronged no one."

"Not wilfully, madam, let us hope; though it is difficult for one to believe that you are unaware that Mr. Butt, as he calls himself, is a married man."

"Married! How dare you say so? It is false."

She spoke with passion, but not, as Mr. Barlow thought, with that indignation which a woman who had really been deceived would have exhibited. Indeed, now he came to think about it, it was hardly possible that Phœbe Mayson, however cut off by her own act from her former life and its sources of information, could have been ignorant of Matthew's marriage.

"Unhappily, madam, it is true. You have been the cause, even though it be the unconscious cause, of the desolation of a happy household, of the desertion of a loving and most trustful wife."

To his surprise she uttered a shrill and scornful laugh. "That is too much," she said. "You are exceeding your instructions—I know now from whom you come."

"If you do so, madam, there is no need for bitterness, but for pity; and, I must add, for contrition. It is a poor triumph to exult over the pure and innocent; and, if I am not mistaken, will be a short-lived one."

"Are you an actor?" she exclaimed contemptuously. "Or are you a madman?"

"My name is Frank Barlow; shall I tell you what was yours before you became Lucy Mortlock, or Mrs. Butt? It was Phœbe Mayson."

She had advanced a step or two in her excitement, but now shrank back into the recess again; her limbs trembled visibly and her voice shook as she replied, "What if it was? What is that to you or anybody?" The last word had a pitiful touch in it which did not escape the other's ear.

"To me, indeed, nothing," he replied, but "everything to her whom you have wronged. If you were anyone but Phœbe Mayson, who won his first love and cast it from you, neither your beauty nor any wiles at your command would have sufficed to steal her husband from her. As it is, taking advantage of that treacherous weapon, you have pierced her heart with it. Nay, more, you have not only seduced him from his home and the true hearts that loved him, but you have been the cause—is it possible that you cannot know it?—of his forsaking the path of honesty and disgracing his name and nature.

Yes, woman, it lies at your door, and no other's, that Matthew Helston is a thief."

"Matthew Helston!" She clasped her hands to her bosom and stared at him in wild amazement. "Matthew Helston?" she reiterated. "What do you know of him? or rather what lies are these you have heard about him and dare repeat to me—to *me*? Matthew Helston a thief! He is an angel! He is a man without a fault, except that years ago he trusted to a woman's word. I thought myself debased and shamed beyond all human creatures," she exclaimed with sudden vehemence, "but you, you slanderer and blasphemer, you are viler yet."

Mr. Barlow answered nothing, but quietly took from his pocket a newspaper containing the offer of the reward for Helston's apprehension, and pointed to it with his finger.

"It is a lie," she muttered between her teeth; "he never took those jewels."

"How do you know that?" inquired Mr. Barlow quietly. "Have you any evidence to prove the contrary?"

"I know it because I know *him*," she answered. "Evidence! Do you think a man who has been scorned and cheated, and forgives——"

"One moment, madam," interposed the lawyer earnestly. "You are altogether in error in supposing that I wish aught but good to Matthew Helston; nay, if it were possible, I would not *think* aught but good of him. I am here on behalf of him and his. If you, too, wish him well——"

"Wish him well?" she echoed, clasping her hands together. "I would give—though that, indeed, would be a worthless gift—my very life to serve him."

"I know not whether you *can* serve him, madam," returned the lawyer gravely, "but it is possible. There are passages in his life, it appears, of which those who thought they knew him best are ignorant. If you will, you can throw light upon them, and in so doing, it may be, cast a gleam on what is at present the profoundest mystery. He has been lost to wife and child and friends for many days; and with him, as you read, have disappeared these jewels. It was my own impression—now, I perceive, a false one—that he had fled with you to France."

"With me? No, no, sir," she answered in a gentle, piteous voice. "He has been good and kind to me, but his love for me is dead. How should it be otherwise, since I am base and vile, and he of all men knows it best? It might have been at one time. Look you, a man thirsts—sees a fair and running brook, but cannot reach it; later on and lower down it becomes accessible enough, but, since it has run through muddy ways, he turns from it with loathing. So it was with him and me. I never loved him as he should be loved, for I was never worthy, but for the sake of the old times, and though all was soil and sin with me, he took compassion on me. There was a man, no matter who, for whom I forsook him. After a little this man grew tired of me and cast me off—as I deserved. Then I fell lower and lower. Once, lately, Matthew Helston saw me in the street

and spoke to me—words that he meant for kindness, but which were coals of fire. He was but poor himself, yet he offered me help—which I refused—to lift me from the mire. But I took my own way. This man who calls himself Mr. Butt offered me marriage. To be the wife of even one like him (God help me) was promotion. Why, you are asking yourself, should he have conferred it on me? I did not put that question to myself, but had I done so I should have answered that I still had attractions for eyes like his; that no honest woman would have married him, and that to those of the baser sort I was superior in many ways. Not a very exalted estimate, you will say, of my poor merits; yet it seems I had appraised them far too high. He went through the form of marriage, indeed; but I have reason to know that it was null and void; and so far (I say it, though a woman—so you may judge what I have suffered) I am thankful to him.”

Her tone throughout was one of the deepest humiliation and despondency, save when she spoke of the man passing as her husband, when the memory of recent cruelty and insult seemed to rouse a momentary bitterness.

Mr. Barlow, though scandalised, was touched. Whatever sins this woman had committed, he felt she had been punished for them.

“If this man is not your husband,” he said gently, “you can escape from him. If my advice can be of any service—or you require the means to return to England——”

"I thank you, sir," she said, with less of gratitude, however, in her tone than self-contempt, "but what becomes of *me* is a small matter. We were speaking of Matthew Helston."

"True; I was in hopes that you could tell me how this Mr. Butt was in possession of the fact that Helston was in Paris and endeavouring to dispose of the jewels. That it is so I have reason to know, since I have just come from M. Monteur, a diamond merchant——"

"In the Rue de Bris?" interrupted the other.

"Yes; how did you know that?"

"Mr. Butt has been there on business, to my knowledge."

"Indeed! On what business?"

"I believe to sell some family diamonds. That is what I thought you came about. There is something amiss with them, I'm certain. I thought they might be lying about the room when you came in, which frightened me."

"Have you ever seen them?" inquired the lawyer quickly.

"Yes; Mr. Butt showed them to me quite recently."

"Are they like these?" inquired Mr. Barlow, producing the drawing of the *parure*.

She shook her head. "I cannot tell," she said; "they have been taken out of their setting; that is what first aroused my suspicions."

"You say, 'first aroused.' Did anything afterwards confirm them?"

"Well, I cannot say they were confirmed before

you put your questions. This man, however—my husband, as he is called—has been nervous, fidgety, and, I think, alarmed of late. He receives many telegrams which seem to annoy him. He is out, as he says, on business, all day long, and returns dissatisfied and disappointed. He was particularly so after his visit to the Rue de Bris. I know he went there, for I waited for him in the cab outside.”

“I think I have it,” exclaimed Mr. Barlow eagerly. “See here, this is a full-length portrait of Matthew Helston; does it bear any resemblance to Mr. Butt?”

Again she shook her head. “Not in the least,” she said contemptuously. “It is Hyperion to a Satyr.”

Mr. Barlow’s countenance fell. “Please, however, to describe the man.”

“He is of middle height and rather stoutly built. His hair is brown; his expression, as I have said, dissatisfied and gloomy.”

Mr. Barlow struck his palms together with a cry of triumph.

“It is as I suspected; though unlike to the eye, the descriptions of these two men tally tolerably well. Helston never went to the Rue de Bris, but only Mr. Butt. And Mr. Butt is Captain Langton.”

“It is possible,” returned the other coolly. “He told me but yesterday that he married me under a feigned name. Does that throw light on anything?”

“It does, it does; much light,” answered the

lawyer thoughtfully; "but not enough. The question of what became of Helston on that night in Moor Street, even if this Langton is the thief, remains as dark as ever."

"Moor Street, Moor Street?" repeated the other; "where have I seen that name before?"

"Think, madam, think," exclaimed the lawyer earnestly. "Everything may hang upon your reply."

"No, I remember now," she said, after a moment's reflection; "I have not seen it, but I have heard it spoken of."

"By whom? By Butt?"

"Yes. He has read a telegram in my presence with Moor Street in it. I feel certain of it."

"How came he to do that?"

"He did not know that he was doing it. These telegrams which are continually arriving seem to excite him strangely."

"Can you let me see one of them?"

"I cannot; he destroys them directly he has read them. But stay—they sometimes come in his absence. I will open the next and let you have a copy of it. I will search his papers; no stone shall be left unturned to aid you in your discovery."

"But that may get you into trouble; the man is, by your own showing, a ruffian, and, as we have now reason to believe, in desperate case."

"I told you that for Matthew Helston's sake I would lay down my life," she interrupted vehemently. "But you need not fear on my account. I am a match for him in wits, and will be careful. That reminds me that he may return at any moment. He

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must not find you here. Give me your address, and trust to me. To-morrow morning, at latest—perhaps to-night—you will have a line from me.”

“But money may be wanting,” urged Mr. Barlow, producing his purse.

“No, no,” she cried imploringly; “I have a few shillings of my own, which will be sufficient; let me do him what good I can at my own cost. Go, go, and trust to me.”

Mr. Barlow did trust implicitly in her goodwill to help him. He understood, if he did not wholly appreciate, the woman’s desire to show her gratitude to Matthew, and her devotion to his interests; but of the result he was far from sanguine. That Langton was at all events a participator in the robbery in Moor Street he had little doubt; that the diamonds in his possession were Lady Pargiter’s he was almost certain, since M. Monteur had recognised them; but the proof of this, he felt, would be far from easy. If the girl had still possessed any hold upon Langton’s affections she might, perhaps, have wormed out of him something of great importance; but it was plain that the ill-assorted pair had quarrelled. The man must know that, every moment during which the jewels remained undisposed of, his position was growing more perilous; he was already, she had said, suspicious and alarmed; how was it possible, then, that she could throw him off his guard, so as to obtain from him any information? She had promised to search his effects, but it was very improbable that he would suffer anything of a compromising character to be in existence. If even he could be

seized (which he could not, since there was no warrant for his apprehension), and the diamonds found upon him, that would only affect the man himself—it would not bring him (Mr. Barlow) one hair's-breadth nearer to the object of his mission.

He went back to his hotel, locked himself into his room, and set to work to think the matter over; but it surprised himself, considering the strength of the impressions and suspicions which crowded his mind, how very little he could make of them as regarded Matthew. That Langton, indeed, had an object in representing Helston as the thief was evident; but there was no sort of clue to his having any real knowledge either of him or his whereabouts.

In the end he wrote a long and minute account of all that had come to his knowledge since his arrival in Paris to Mr. Brail; and bade him hold himself in readiness to act at once on the receipt of any telegram.

Up to midnight, at which hour he retired to seek the rest he so much needed, no message had arrived for him from Phoebe Mayson.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE VICTIM.

NOTWITHSTANDING his anxieties and the eider-down quilt, Mr. Barlow slept soundly for some hours, and would doubtless have continued to sleep, but for a very curious circumstance. He had been dreaming, of couse, of Amy. There were some obstacles to his union with her (quite different to those which really existed), and he had overcome them by running away with her (which in real life he would certainly never have dreamt of), only he had no money to pay the coachman, who was (naturally enough) very impatient.

"I am the coachman," the man was saying. "Remember the coachman, coachman, coachman." When he went so far as to poke Mr. Barlow in the ribs with his whip-handle that gentleman awoke and found himself in the presence of two soldiers in uniform, one of whom was bringing the rays of a dark lantern to bear directly upon his half-closed eyes, and the other was addressing him as "*Cochon*."

"Who the deuce are you?" exclaimed Mr. Barlow with all an Englishman's indignation at this intrusion in his apartment, and especially at a military occupation of it.

"We are here in the name of the law," was the reply in French. "You must come along with us immediately."

One word of this only, "*loi*," was intelligible to

Mr. Barlow, but it helped him to understand that, in spite of their swords and their furious aspect, these men were policemen, and not soldiers.

His hand dived under his pillow and produced a phrase-book and a pocket-dictionary, which never left the neighbourhood of his person, and by aid of the former he inquired what they wanted, and what was the matter.

By the aid of the latter he learnt that he was wanted at the Hotel de la Fontaine, and that the cause was MURDER.

“Great Heavens! it must be poor Phoebe Mayson,” cried he, with a start of horror; “and that villain Langton must have done it.”

His excitement and indignation were so extreme that the manifestation of them, had he been accused of the crime, would in all probability—duly manipulated by the Judge of Instruction—have brought him to the guillotine; but fortunately the suspicions of the police had not taken this direction.

He sprang out of bed and huddled on his clothes with fingers that trembled with passion, and even with remorse. It flashed upon him in an instant that the poor girl had come to her death at the hands of her paramour in the performance of the service that he (Barlow) had himself suggested. For the first time in his life—or at all events since he had served his articles—he burst into expressions which were certainly not to be found in his French and English dictionary. The beauty of the woman,

the wretchedness of her situation, her tenderness, her resolution (alas! so self-sacrificing) to obtain at all risks some tidings of her lost love, recurred to him with terrible force and distinctness, and stirred his nature to its depths. "The wild beast of force that lives within the sinews of man" was aroused within him. For the moment the one wish of this peace-loving, law-abiding man was to find himself face to face with her assassin.

As he passed out of the gate between the two *gendarmes*, and got into the *fiacre* awaiting them there, the porter exclaimed to himself, "There goes a murderer. Who would have thought it to have seen him yesterday? Bah; why should one wonder? He is English."

But even if he had understood him Mr. Barlow would have cared nothing.

"*Est-il mort?*" inquired the poor fellow of his companions piteously, at which they shrugged their shoulders, smiled, and (thinking, of course from his use of the masculine, that he referred to the criminal), replied, "Well, not at present. The little knife" (their euphemism for the guillotine) "does not work quite so quick."

But as it happened poor Phœbe was not yet dead—only dying and speechless, as the Commissary of Police, who was in waiting at the door of the hotel, informed Mr. Barlow in broken English. The criminal was in custody elsewhere, but *Pauvre Madame* was upstairs, and wished to see him. He was conducted to the same room in which he had

seen her a few hours ago, but which was now occupied by certain official persons. One of them, a *juge de paix*, informed him in English that he had been taking the declaration of Madame, who lay in the inner apartment. A doctor was with her, who would presently summon Monsieur to her bedside.

"Is there no hope?" inquired Mr. Barlow, deeply affected.

The magistrate shook his head. "She has received half a dozen stabs, any one of which, says the doctor, would be enough to kill her. The bleeding has been averted for the moment, but not before she swooned away. *Ma foi!* what carnage—and what beauty! But monsieur knows her?"

Twenty-four hours ago Mr. Barlow would not, perhaps, have felt complimented at such knowledge being imputed to him; but all that was changed now. To his inward eye the unhappy girl appeared not a saint, indeed, but a martyr. He bowed his head in grave acquiescence, and asked if it was known why the crime had been committed.

The *juge de paix*, a bright little old man, who applied himself to his snuff-box every other minute in a manner that suggested the pecking of a bird, here shrugged his shoulders and held his head and hands sideways, as though he were clasping an invisible Punch's baton. "Ah, well, I suppose it was the old story. There was an open desk and letters strewn about; Madame had been imprudent, and her husband was transported with jealousy."

"Permit me to say that your supposition is entirely incorrect," said Mr. Barlow quickly. It was offensive to him that this unhappy woman should be thus misrepresented in the very last—and perhaps the best—action of her life. "The cause of quarrel was, I have reason to believe, something entirely different. The desk and letters, it will be found, were the man's, not hers; she was seeking for information on a friend's account, not her own, which, as I apprehend, this fellow resented."

"Resented! *Ma foi!* There is no doubt that he killed her for it. He was a powerful man, and one stab, as I have said, would have been her deathblow; but in his passion he struck again and again."

"Great Heavens! How frightful!" exclaimed Mr. Barlow. "How was it, if this happened as you say, that the poor woman could cry out?"

"She did not cry out, or at least no one heard her. The murderer, having done his work, thought himself quite secure. He had packed his carpet-bag, and would have got clean off but for the police, who in Paris are intelligent, prompt, and vigilant to a degree that is astonishing."

It was curious, and struck Mr. Barlow with some disgust, that in this anteroom of death his companion should thus discourse so lightly, even to the extent of praising the local constabulary.

"But, whatever the intelligence of your police," he answered grimly, "they could scarcely have foreseen the murder before its commission."

"True; but it was not on account of the murder that they were here at all; that was merely a fortunate coincidence; they came to arrest the man for another crime."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, for trying to extract money—what is your legal phrase?—well, to extract money under false pretences. He had been endeavouring to palm off upon certain jewellers sham diamonds in place of real ones. Only, instead of catching a swindler, we caught a murderer."

This tidings, so wholly unexpected, would, under any other circumstances have both astonished and interested Mr. Barlow; but just now more serious affairs were pressing upon him.

"How was it," he inquired, "that you came to send for me?"

"Well, after the assassin had been secured Madame recovered a little; she gasped out a few words in English, which it was my duty to take down, and they expressed a wish to see you. Moreover, there was a memorandum found upon Madame, addressed to you, which presently——"

Here the door of the inner apartment opened, and out came the doctor with grave face, followed by a female servant of the hotel in tears.

"The gentleman is too late," he said, with a glance at the Englishman; "the poor lady is dead."

For one moment the young lawyer's heart had no room for aught but sorrow and pity; but the next the fate of the dead was forgotten in the

interests of the living. "Has she, then, died in vain," thought he, "as respects Matthew?"

"Would monsieur like to step in?" inquired the magistrate, pointing to the other apartment.

Monsieur did not like it; was, indeed, very far from liking it; but he somehow felt it to be his duty to see the last of poor Phoebe, so followed the other into the room.

She was lying on one of the two little beds with which the room was furnished, with her eyes closed, and but for the extreme pallor of her face she might have been taken to be asleep. The doctor, from reverence or sentiment, had crossed her hands upon her bosom, and the housemaid had placed in them a little waxen flower which had formed the ornament of the mantelpiece. She might have been a saint, poor soul, so far as looks went.

"Things were very different when I first arrived here," observed the magistrate, after a long silence; "but, you see, we have put them straight."

"In our country," answered Mr. Barlow in his judicial tone (for his tender feelings had got the better of him, and of course he was ashamed of them), "everything would have been left as it was for official investigation."

"You forget that the poor young lady was alive, monsieur, and yet could not be moved. I made my notes, and then we set things comfortable for her. We are a nation that cannot under any circumstances forget our politeness." And the Frenchman bowed, with the palms of his hands outwards, as if in illustration of his remark.

"You have done everything you could for my poor countrywoman, and I thank you," said Mr. Barlow warmly. "You spoke of some memorandum."

"Yes; I have it here. I can let you see it, but for the present, of course, it is the property of the Law; that must be our excuse, although it bears your address upon it, for our having possessed ourselves of its contents."

He produced from his breast-pocket a little note, unsealed, and folded hurriedly together in a triangular form. Mr. Barlow took it, not without a shudder (for it was covered with blood).

"Yes, indeed," said the other in answer to his look of horror, "it is the saddest of *billet-doux*. The blood on it is madame's heart's blood. It is torn, too. My impression is that there was a struggle for it, during which she thrust it into her bosom, where we found it. In his rage and fear the assassin, after he had stabbed her, must have forgotten it."

With fingers that trembled as much with emotion as with anxiety Mr. Barlow unfolded the note, which was literally sodden with blood. The words were straggling, hardly legible, and had evidently been written in great haste or excitement.

"M. H. is still in Moor — No — — — starving. For God's — — — haste."

The blanks occurred in the places where the paper had been torn off.

"Does monsieur understand it?" inquired the Frenchman with great interest.

"Yes, no—that is, but partially. It may be of the greatest importance."

"And it has also, of course, the very deepest interest for monsieur."

"Indeed, indeed it has," sighed Mr. Barlow.

"Then look, sir. In any other case it would have been my duty to retain it; but in such circumstances as these, when the assassin has, as it were, been taken in the very act, I think the law may waive its right. The note is monsieur's."

"You are most kind," said Mr. Barlow earnestly. "In return for such unexpected courtesy I can only say that I shall remain at my present address, at your service, in case my testimony in this unhappy matter should be necessary."

Then he turned for a last look at poor Phœbe. As he gazed upon the pale sweet face, never more to know remorse or disgrace, he felt something cold placed gently in his hand. It was a pair of scissors. The action would certainly never have occurred to himself, but, thus suggested, he cut off a lock of the dead woman's hair and placed it in his pocket-book.

"Madame is in Heaven; monsieur will consequently meet her again," said the *juge de paix* consolingly. In his own mind he had not the shadow of a doubt that the blameless Mr. Barlow had been her lover.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NEW ARRIVAL.

"How can ye pipe, ye little birds, and I so weary, full of care?" inquires the poet in his desolation; and the demonstration of happiness in our fellow-creatures, the while we are ourselves bowed down with trouble, jars on us even more cruelly than the glad voices of nature. It was Christmas-time, and into the bereaved little household in Cavendish Grove some echoes of the surrounding jollity perforce penetrated. Husbands came home from business, not for a few hours only, but for one or two days of gladsome leisure, and were received with shouts of delight from their juveniles. Sabey heard them, and for once could not thank Heaven for the happiness of children. No holly decked the house as in old times; Matthew, old-fashioned in his habits, and somewhat conventional in his observances, had been fond of "keeping Christmas" in the ancient fashion; and the women, country-bred, had been wont to adorn every room with glistening leaf and ruddy berry; but they could not do so now, for it would have been but a mockery of their woe. Below stairs, indeed, the servant girl had permission, as usual, to invite her father and mother to the annual feast; but even she felt the gloom of Matthew's absence, for master was—or, alas! had been—a great favourite with her, as masters will be who never speak a cross word. Mary did not pretend to under-

stand the ins and outs of the Moor Street question, but she had the faith which brings forth works; for when the butcher's boy had ventured to tell her, not in malice, but as an interesting piece of news, that a reward was offered for Mr. Helston's apprehension on the charge of having stolen "diamants," she had slapped one cheek for him with such good will that—notwithstanding the season—he had not dreamt of offering the other, but had fled incontinently. Even the sprig of mistletoe which the greengrocer's man had brought as a free gift had been received with a "Drat your impudence!" instead of that "Get along with you!!" which, while seeming to discourage, had invited him on previous occasions.

Her "other master," as she sometimes entitled Uncle Stephen—being not so independent of spirit on her own account as on that of others—she described as being "very low in his mind," which she had plenty of opportunities of observing while she waited upon him at his lonely meals. For there were now times when even Amy had not the courage or the strength to share them. It was not mere disinclination that prevented her doing so. Although wounded to the very core by the apostasy of Mr. Durham with respect to Matthew, she was just enough to perceive that he was not to blame for being unable to resist the force of conviction, and never for a moment did she forget the obligations which she, and Sabey, and Matthew himself, were under to the good old man. It was her duty certainly to have borne him company in his solitude and she would have done so had it been possible.

But her spirits, already depressed by the catastrophe of Matthew, had been for the present fairly broken down by the loss of her lover. With Sabey, indeed, she kept up the appearance of philosophy; for to have shown herself as she really was would have been to add a grievous weight to her sister's burden; but this effort to hide her feelings cost her dear, and rendered her still more unfit for the companionship of others.

On Christmas-day, however, she did make shift to come down to dinner. (Sabey also had attempted to do so, but some pang of recollection, or association, had proved too intense for her at the last moment, and she had remained upstairs with baby.) The meal was early, and, as it happened, it was the first time Mr. Durham and herself had met that morning. He looked very worn and wan, but mustered up a smile to greet her.

"If I do not wish you a happy Christmas, Amy," he said, in a low and gentle tone, "you will understand the reason."

Even that was too much for the poor girl—or perhaps it was the tenderness with which he spoke that moved her—and she burst into tears.

"I am glad to see you cry, my dear," he said simply. "Do not be ashamed of it," he added, perceiving her efforts to restrain herself; "I would cry too if I could. How is Sabey?"

"The same—the same. Only, I think, the day—being what it is—has upset her."

Mr. Durham sighed and held up his hands.

"Christmas-day," he murmured bitterly. "'Glad tidings of great joy!'"

"It has done me good, however," said Amy humbly. "It has reminded me of my duty—my loving duty. Will you kiss me and forgive me, Uncle Stephen?"

"I will kiss you, my dear, but I have nothing to forgive."

"Yes, yes, I have done wrong. Matthew himself would say so if he could speak. I have been hard and cruel to you."

"Not to me, my dear, not to me, but to yourself—and to another."

"Then I ask his pardon too," she murmured.

"May I tell him so?"

"No, no; that is—any message from me would be misunderstood."

"Do you know whither he is gone, Amy?"

"No; don't tell me; all is over between us, past and gone for ever. Spare me, I beseech you, spare me," she added imploringly.

"Well, we will speak no more of him just now. I wish you to know, however, that his last act before leaving England——"

"England?"

"Yes; I say his last act was to draw up a will for me by which dear Sabey will very soon be freed from at least material anxieties. I mention it in case, for her child's sake, such fears, in addition to her other woes, should be pressing upon her."

"How good and kind you are!"

"She does not think so," sighed Uncle Stephen.

"Indeed, indeed she does," cried Amy earnestly.

"And does she know how I have been convinced against my will as regards Matthew?" inquired the old man eagerly.

"Oh, no; oh, no. If she did—with me, much as I love Matthew and believe in him, and shall do so while life is in me, it is different—but——"

"'But if Sabey knew,' you were about to say."

"Uncle Stephen, she must never know."

"I understand. If she did, she would not take a penny of my money, dead or alive; and never forgive me."

"Indeed I fear it."

"But if, in the meantime, something should occur which puts beyond all doubt—all hope—the question on which we differ?"

"You mean if Matthew should be proved guilty?"

"Yes. Do not be angry; I merely put a supposititious case; if you will have it so, an impossible one."

"In such a case," said Amy slowly, "the child might benefit by your good intentions; the mother would die. But there can be no such proof."

Here there was a loud double knock at the front door. "What is that?" cried Amy, with a quick start.

"I cannot tell. It may be what I fear and you deny."

She shook her head. "It is not that," she said.

"And yet you shuddered, Amy."

"Yes; because it may be tidings of his death—of his dishonour never."

Here the door opened, and the servant-maid was pushed aside by a short, spare old man, with withered face, but keen and piercing eyes. "How are you?" he said quickly. "You don't know me, but I know you. You're Mr. Durham—his uncle, like myself; and you are Amy Thurlow, his wife's sister."

"It is Mr. Roger Helston, from Latbury," explained Amy to Uncle Stephen.

"Yes, I believe so; though things have happened enough to make one doubt one's own identity," put in the visitor with irritation. "What is the meaning of it—this reward for Matthew's apprehension?"

"It is an infamous and lying charge made by Lady Pargiter," answered Amy.

"Of course it is. My nephew, and a thief! Why, damn her impudence, I'd as soon believe he was—well, a unicorn. But what does it mean? I'll make her pay for it; he shall have the best counsel in all England—Stork must lead—if it costs me a thousand pounds. We'll lay the damages at ten thousand. Where is he?"

"Heaven only knows," said Mr. Durham gravely.

"Oh, I see," replied the other impetuously: "Matthew has not turned up yet. Stork shall be retained, however, forthwith. My nephew and a Helston called a thief! That shall cost her ladyship a pretty penny. Where's Matthew's wife?"

"She is upstairs, sir," said Amy, "too unwell both in mind and body——"

"Ay, ay, sick and sorry too, no doubt," interrupted the other brusquely. "I see you are going to dine. As I have touched nothing since I read

this cussed thing at Latbury last night, I'll just sit down and peck a bit. At meals I never listen to any matter of moment, the discussion of which always interferes with digestion; but after dinner you shall tell me what it all means."

The first tidings Mr. Helston senior had heard of Matthew's disappearance had, it seemed, been derived from the publication of the reward, since he had just returned from America, whither he had been on important business. If it was not his habit to listen to other people at dinner, that did not prevent his talking himself, and before the meal was over he had put his companions in full possession of the reasons for his presence in Cavendish Grove.

After Matthew's departure from Latbury he had missed him much, and would gladly have held out the hand of reconciliation. He seemed to have expected that the young fellow would have made the first advance; but, as he did not do so, pride stepped in and moved him to send for a far-away cousin of about the same age as Matthew to fill his place in the office. This youngster, as he had previously satisfied himself, had one good point—he had not the slightest leaning towards the mechanical arts. But with his negative virtue his merits appeared to have ended. No Madge had any metal to attract him, but on the other hand he had been very impressionable to the charms of Moll and Bet. His behaviour, indeed, had scandalised the old lawyer not a little. "Now, Matthew," said the old man (as though poor Amy had been a lay figure), "had only

made a fool of himself with gals on two occasions; the first was a mere fleeting fancy—— Eh?”

For Uncle Stephen, whose thoughts had flashed to Bleak Street and Lucy Mortlock, here groaned involuntarily.

“Oh, there was nothing wrong, sir,” continued Mr. Helston with irritation, imagining that he had been called to order on the ground of propriety; “moreover the young woman most fortunately ran off with somebody else. The other affair was more serious. Miss Thurlow’s presence, of which you are so good as to remind me, prevents my speaking upon that subject. I still think Matthew’s marriage was a mistake, but I have forgiven it. Well, as I say, he made but two escapades among the petticoats—which is much below the average. Then Richard (his successor) was a born fool besides—the very last thing (not even excepting a knave) which is wanted in a lawyer’s office. To give you an extreme instance of it, it was he himself who on the very day of my return to Latbury pointed out to me the reward in the newspaper, thinking doubtless to curry favour with me, or that it would give me pleasure to hear that poor Matthew was in trouble. ‘Thank you, Dick,’ I said, ‘for opening my eyes.’ ‘That Mr. Matthew must be bad indeed,’ he simpered. ‘You’re a liar,’ I answered. ‘What I thanked you for was for letting me see into your character. That you were an idiot of course I knew, but I did not know you were a scoundrel.’ And I sent him packing. If Matthew chooses to come back to Latbury and be my partner the place is open to him.”

"Alas, sir, you forget that your nephew is lost to us," sobbed Amy. She admired this old fellow for his sure and simple faith, and gave more credit to his honest indignation than perhaps it deserved. If Matthew had not borne his name it is possible that the ties of blood would not so easily have moved him. As it was, his nephew's disgrace cast a shadow on himself, which his proud nature resented. As for Uncle Stephen he felt that two minutes' private talk with the old lawyer must of necessity scatter his confidence in his nephew's innocence to the winds, and in all probability his goodwill with it.

"Lost!" echoed Mr. Helston contemptuously. "He won't be lost for long now that I have come to look for him. What's the matter?"

The maid had entered and whispered to Amy that there was someone in the hall who wished to speak to her "very pertickler. And, oh! please, miss, it's a perliceman."

Poor Amy's nerves for once failed her, but not her faith. She believed that some crisis had occurred in Matthew's case, or that Lady Pargiter had taken some cruel step. For the moment she could neither move nor speak.

"What's the matter?" repeated Mr. Helston, addressing the maid.

"Oh, sir, there's a perliceman in the passage."

"What of that? One would think it was a burglar."

He stepped nimbly to the door, where, indeed, one of the force was standing in the attitude of attention.

"Now, my man, what is it?"

"I have a message for Miss Amy Thurlow, sir, from Inspector Brail."

"Very good; here she is. Let's have it."

"Mr. Matthew Helston has been found, mum."

"God in heaven be thanked!" she cried. "Alive and well?"

"Oh, yes, alive, mum; but not to say well and hearty. I have been sent on ahead in a hansom cab to say as he will be here in half an hour. They're obliged to bring him pretty slow. He'll have to be put to bed and looked to."

"Port—a glass of port for the young lady," cried Mr. Helston vehemently. "That's right. You're better now, ain't you? You won't go into hysterics, not you; you're not a fool, like Cousin Richard."

His rough but kindly tones had the best effect upon the poor girl. Mere sympathy and tenderness would have destroyed her self-possession utterly.

"He is not ill—I mean not dangerously ill?" she murmured.

"No, mum; only a bit weak and off his head, having had nothing to eat for the last eight-and-forty hours."

"Nothing to eat on Christmas-day!" exclaimed the old lawyer. "What can it all mean?"

Amy had flown upstairs to her sister, so that his inquiry was addressed to Mr. Durham. Uncle Stephen, however, only shook his head and murmured, "I know nothing." The question that trembled on his own lips was, "Is he innocent?" But they could not frame it.

There was a sharp knock at the front door; a sound of slithering footsteps as of men carrying some heavy body. But Uncle Stephen knew nothing of it. With a muttered cry of "Matthew! Matthew!" which seemed to well from his very heart, the old man had fainted away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOUND.

ARE men better than they seem, or worse? is a question that we are apt to answer according to our own circumstances in relation to them. When Fortune smiles upon us our fellow-creatures appear in rose tints. "There is a deal of kindness in the world," we observe, when we don't want it; or, at the least, "Depend upon it there is something good in everybody." When Fortune frowns we alter our opinion on this subject—it must be confessed not altogether without reason. On the whole it seems doubtful whether one is more often surprised by an act of generosity, or by one of baseness. I have known quite noble things done by almost the last persons in the world one would have thought capable of them; and also, alas! some very base actions performed by the most highly principled persons. In many cases, perhaps, it has in reality been the merest toss-up whether the man should behave like a hero or a scoundrel; but we, who know nothing of the inward struggle can only judge

by the result. Although Mr. Signet had not absolutely told Miss Amy Thurlow that if she would marry him he would not prosecute her brother-in-law for theft, but that if she wouldn't he would pursue him with the utmost rigour of the law, their last interview had certainly left upon her an impression of that nature. Perhaps the jeweller had not been unwilling that she should think the worst—even though it must needs put his own character in no very agreeable light—but though he had, as it were, held the screw in his fingers, he had had, to do him justice, no intention of putting it on. His nature was not chivalric, but he was not a Colonel Kirk; and before he had proposed that bargain to Amy, let us remember, he had positively forbidden Mr. Brail to take any steps towards Matthew's apprehension. When he returned an unsuccessful suitor from Cavendish Grove the detective informed him of Mr. Barlow's visit, and not only very frankly set before him all that that gentleman had stated, but also (for which, as we know, he had his private reasons) said all that could be said in favour of his mission.

"He is not gone to Paris on your behalf—of course not—but the main object of his journey is to reclaim the diamonds; and, considering his connection with Helston, he has as good a chance——"

"It's all nonsense," interrupted Mr. Signet irritably. "The game's up. If Lady Pargiter were not such a brute I'd throw up the sponge and pay up at once."

"That would be madness indeed, Mr. Signet. Where's her receipt?"

"What the deuce does the receipt signify, Mr. Brail, if she can prove the diamonds to be in Helston's possession? Not that they're there now, of course. He sold 'em for what they will fetch. My money is as good as gone."

"If I felt sure of that I'd get it out of his skin."

"I don't want his skin," snapped Mr. Signet. "They may all be hanged together for what I care."

He used even a stronger word than "hanged"; while the comprehensiveness of his "all—" though, fortunately, Mr. Brail did not know whom it included—was appalling. The most that the detective could extract from his employer was a promise that he would make no overtures to Lady Pargiter without previously communicating with him.

On the second morning came Mr. Barlow's letter from Paris, the contents of which revived Mr. Brail amazingly. They pointed to nothing certain, it is true, but they roused his flagging interest in the case, just as the whimper of a trusty hound will put heart in the desponding sportsman: they might not kill the fox, but there was an end to "drawing blank," at all events. The diamonds were in Paris, at present undisposed of, and every day would render their negotiation more dangerous. Surely Mr. Signet would now entrust him with the commission of gaining possession of them? There would be a difficulty, unless they could be absolutely

identified, in getting a warrant for the apprehension of this man Butt, but that could be surmounted. The inexplicable objection that his employer had evinced to the arrest of Helston no longer applied to the case—for Helston had not got the diamonds, though he had doubtless been their original appropriator. Above all, the discovery of the woman gave Mr. Brail great hopes.

With Mr. Barlow's letter in his hand he was about to start from his chambers—he occupied a second floor in the lane at the back of the Temple—for Paulet Street, when a telegram was put into his hand. It detailed as succinctly as could be all that had happened at the Hôtel de la Fontaine on the previous night, with a verbatim copy of the note found in the bosom of the murdered girl.

Mr. Brail's first act on the receipt of this astonishing intelligence was characteristic. He telegraphed to a French commissioner of police with whom he was acquainted, that the jewels in possession of the assassin were in all probability the Pargiter diamonds, and laid claim to them in the name of their owner, pending further and more authoritative proceedings.

Then he began to give his attention to the mere matters of life and death. What engaged his deepest attention was, of course, the last message of the murdered girl:

“M. H. is still in Moor—No——starving. For God's——haste.”

Some of the blanks he could easily fill in. “Matthew Helston is still in Moor Street, No. He

is starving. For God's sake make haste," was what he made out the message to be. But what did that "No" mean? If she had found her information as to his whereabouts incorrect that was surely—making every allowance for haste and fear—not the way in which she would have expressed herself. That "No," therefore, doubtless stood for Number; and the missing figures were 10: No. 10 Moor Street being Lady Pargiter's address. If Mr. Signet had been present he would have exclaimed, "Then Helston is there after all. I always said that woman was capable of anything!" But Mr. Brail jumped to no such conclusion. He touched a handbell, and a sharp-looking Hebrew youth was by his side in an instant.

"Has Brown made his report this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is he?"

"Gone home to bed. He lodges in Milford Lane."

"That is but a stone's throw. Bring him in ten minutes, and I'll give you half a crown; if you do it in less time, I'll give you ten shillings."

We talk of the marvels of electricity, but the attraction of metals for a Jew-boy puts lightning into the shade. In seven minutes Brown was in the room, dishevelled, panting, and in his shirt-sleeves, but still Brown.

"You have been on duty in Moor Street every night since this diamond robbery. Are there any houses in it let in lodgings?"

"Well, there are hotels, sir."

"Will you answer my question?"

"There are no lodging-houses; it is too fine a place."

"And all the houses are occupied?"

"Yes, sir. That is, all the furnished houses. There is one, however, unfurnished."

"What number?"

"Number 11, sir."

Mr. Brail gave a sudden start; then scratched his leg, as if a flea had bitten him.

"Does anyone ever enter it?" he inquired in an indifferent tone.

"Only the caretaker, sir—a shabby, shambling sort of fellow. I've seen him let himself in with a latch-key."

"Often?"

"Well, yes, sir; every night, mostly."

"Last night?"

"Well, no, sir; not last night."

"The night before?"

"Well, no, sir. Now you speak of it, I have not noticed him the last night or two."

"There's a bill in the window, I suppose?"

"No, sir, there's no bill; the house is let. They were saying so at the public-house."

"What did they say?"

"Carberry's man, the house agents in Bond Street—he was taking a dram the other night—said they had let it a month ago to some gentleman, but they had not seen the colour of his money. I think there's some hitch about it."

"Perhaps so. That will do. You may go to bed again. Noah, call a growler."

"Don't you mean a hansom, sir?"

"I think I said a growler. That boy is getting to think for himself," muttered Mr. Brail, "which will be his ruin."

In two minutes the detective was being driven at a rapid rate to Bond Street, in company with two members of the force whom he had picked up from a police station on his way. It being Christmas-day the streets were comparatively clear; so that Mr. Brail's suggestion to the driver to "look alive" could be carried out; but the same circumstance might have proved an obstacle to the detective's wish for speed, if his own character had been less determined. At Carberry's there was only one clerk on the premises, and, as he briefly but distinctly informed his visitor, he was not there to do business with anyone on Christmas-day. "So you'll just have to wait for the key of No. 11 Moor Street till to-morrow morning," was his peroration.

"Very good; it was in mere civility to Carberry that I asked the favour," returned Mr. Brail. "It will not take us five minutes to break the door open. Perhaps your employers would prefer that course. I am a detective policeman. Good morning."

He not only got the house-key on the instant, but a little oil to make it turn softly in the lock; and on they drove.

Moor Street was as silent and dull as usual, and even a trifle duller. Its tenants were mostly in the country, keeping Christmas, or rather having it kept

for them; but No. 11 was by far the dreariest house in the street. It had been empty only a month or two, but signs of neglect, though not of decay, had become already manifest. The shuttered windows were black with dust, and in a less fashionable neighbourhood (where street-boys are allowed) would undoubtedly have been broken. Under the sheltering porch the accumulated mud looked filthier by contrast with the surrounding snow.

Mr. Brail got out first and opened the door; one policeman swiftly followed him, and the other remained in the cab, with his eye on the area steps. If he had been seen outside, and on the watch, there would have been a ten-deep semicircle of spectators round him in as many seconds.

Within No. 11 all was not so neglected as without. Much to their astonishment the hall was furnished in the ordinary manner, but it struck damp and cold, and, quietly as the two men closed the door behind them, the sound reverberated through the house. With one hasty glance around him Mr. Brail led the way upstairs, exploring room after room, while his companion remained on the landing, lest a rabbit should bolt from the burrow by some second hole. If they spoke to one another it was in whispers, and when they replied it was in monosyllables, or more often by a mere gesture. There was not a living thing to be seen except the spiders; nor was there an article of furniture save, as we have said, in the hall. In the drawing-room, the faded splendours of the ceilings and the carved marble of the mantel-

pieces, rendered the surrounding barrenness still more marked.

Returning to the hall floor, they still found no traces of recent tenancy, and they explored the kitchen and offices with the same result. The caretaker, as Mr. Brown had called him, had either only visited his charge occasionally, or was a man strangely indifferent, for one of his calling, to his personal comfort.

"There is not a soul in the place?" observed the policeman, speaking above his breath for the first time.

"I am sure I don't know," returned Mr. Brail, coolly. "We have not tried the cellar."

The door, which was next the pantry, and in the centre of the house, as cellar-doors should be, was locked. Mr. Brail stooped down and examined the jambs and the keyhole. "This has been opened recently," he observed coolly. "Light your lantern and keep your staff handy. Now give me the jemmy."

In two minutes, by aid of this ingenious instrument, the door was forced open, and discovered a flight of steps leading into darkness. The atmosphere was close and, by comparison with that of the outer air, even warm. They descended the steps, and presently the policeman's bullseye flashed upon a human figure lying on a mattress and wrapped in a railway-rug. His face was white and wan, and his eyes gazed vacantly upon the light and them.

"I thought so!" exclaimed Mr. Brail, allowing himself a momentary gratification at the confirma-

tion of his own astuteness. "It is the very man."

"The Butterfly Wing will do it," murmured the prostrate figure. "The mistake was in the head of the Nut."

"The gent is drunk," observed the policeman, with a shake of the head that suggested something more than reprobation—a pathetic regret that the circumstances did not permit of the other's being taken into custody—"run in."

"Go to Dr. Creyke, you fool; he lives at No. 6 in the next street; bring him here immediately," cried Mr. Brail with a contempt that bordered on savagery. Then he knelt down tenderly enough by the side of the mattress, and, pulling a flask from his pocket, applied it to Matthew's lips.

"You shall have soup at Carberry's, my poor fellow, if I make it out of that young man's liver," he murmured consolingly; "and then you shall be took home."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE KEY TO THE ENIGMA.

MATTHEW HELSTON had been lying in his own bed in Cavendish Grove for many a day before he got his wits back, much less was able to give any account of his disappearance. If a less skilful man than Dr. Creyke had been sent for by Mr. Brail, or if there had been a few more hours' delay in finding the Lost Man, he would have been found dead.

As it was, the comforts which poor Sabey had provided in her hopings against hope for his reception, "in case he should have met with some accident or have been taken ill," and which even Amy had looked upon with tender pity rather than approval, were eminently useful. The hot bath to be prepared at a few minutes' notice—and which was ready by the time he was carried over the threshold—the fire in his room, the beef-tea (for so long had been his abstinence that no more solid food could be given to him) were all factors, and not unimportant ones, in the slowly worked out sum of his recovery.

After the first day or two, however, the doctor pronounced the patient out of danger.

"It is now merely a question of time," he explained to Uncle Stephen, "or rather of constitution (which is gaining ground) *versus* exposure, want, and cerebral excitement (the effects of which are vanish-

ing); it is the last which will remain the longest, and which is the least explicable."

"Gad, I think it's explained easily enough," said Mr. Durham. "To be locked up in defiance of the *Habeas Corpus* Act for three weeks in a cellar is enough to 'cerebrally excite' a saint."

"It is not that, sir," said the doctor coolly (he had a very grey head and shaggy white eyebrows, from which, combined with his long standing in the profession, he had obtained the sobriquet of "Nestor Creyke," and he treated all the world as his grand-children). "He has not been suffering from mental irritation, as you imagine; he has not been thinking even of getting out of his place of confinement; his symptoms are the same with those I have observed in a patient of mine who has devoted himself too exclusively to weighing the sun on an empty stomach."

Uncle Stephen, who was as yet by no means himself again, permitted himself a quiet smile, but said nothing. After what had occurred he thought it generally advisable to say very little. Most gentlemen of his age and reputation would have deeply resented the complete and utter failure of his own forebodings, but for his part he was only ashamed of them. When Sabey came every morning to her half-opened door to give him a kiss—which was all he saw of her, for she never left her husband, day or night—he felt that he was obtaining it under false pretences. How would she feel towards him, he wondered, when she came to hear from his own lips—for he was resolved to tell her—that he had

been a traitor to Matthew, not at heart, indeed, but in his too logical mind?

On the second day of Matthew's return, Mr. Helston the elder, who had in the interim very thoughtfully absented himself, leaving the little household to take uninterrupted charge of its sick man, dropped in to dinner. He seemed to take it for granted that bygones were bygones—indeed, that he, in fact, had been the person aggrieved—and that it was out of the question that he should be otherwise than welcome. After earnest inquiries as to the health of his nephew he proceeded to unburden his mind upon a matter with which it appeared to have been much exercised.

"Who, may I ask," inquired he, "is Mr. Frank Barlow?"

Poor Amy turned scarlet, but Uncle Stephen answered calmly, "A very kind and honest fellow, who lives next door to us."

"Ah, a friend of the family, I presume," said Mr. Helston, "though I never heard of him. Well, that explains what I should otherwise consider a most infernal piece of impertinence. When I left you yesterday I drove straight to Stork's, Q.C., who had gone to spend the day at his club. His clerk said it would be as good as his place was worth to send him there on business; so I called this morning (when, by-the-by, he apologised very politely, saying that as a family man he made a point of spending his Christmas-day in complete domesticity).

"Well," said I, "there is no hurry in the matter I called about; only I wished for certain to secure

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your services in an action for libel, which will at once be instituted by a nephew of mine against one Lady Pargiter."

"Now, that's curious," he said, "for I am retained in that affair already."

"What! for the defence? By that woman?"

"No, for the prosecution. I got a telegram from Paris last night, from your nephew's attorney, Mr. Frank Barlow."

"The deuce you have!" said I. "I didn't even know he had an attorney. I thought I had been pretty quick in securing Stork; and also, as Matthew's uncle, I think I might have been trusted to do it."

"But Mr. Barlow didn't know you were in town," observed Uncle Stephen conciliatingly; "nor even—dear me! how should he?"

"I see; you mean that there was no reason to trust to me before yesterday," returned the old man drily. "Well, perhaps not. But this young fellow—Stork told me he was quite young—must be a deuced sharp practitioner."

"Mr. Barlow is a very intelligent man," observed Uncle Stephen, taking care to avert his eyes from Amy, "and to his astuteness and goodwill, as Mr. Brail told me yesterday, it is solely owing that our nephew is still alive. He went over to Paris and discovered in twenty-four hours where poor Matthew was. *How* he got there we don't know even now, but he was starving. Brail's view is that the man who shut him up there, whoever he was, had become savage because he couldn't sell the diamonds,

and had cut off his supplies of food. It's one of the most abominable cases that were ever heard of. However, the villain has been arrested for the murder of somebody else by the French police."

"Then they will be sure to discover extenuating circumstances," put in Mr. Helston. "However," he added, rubbing his hands, "my Lady Pargiter, who called my nephew a thief, is, thank Heaven, in England. We shall trounce *her*."

"Oh, Mr. Helston," cried Amy, "do not let us think of revenge and retribution now; let us only be thankful. If you could but see poor Sabey, her heart has no room for aught but gratitude to Heaven for having sent her back her Lost One, even though he looks so ill and pale and weak."

"My dear young lady," observed Mr. Helston coolly, "I hope he will *look* all that for some time to come, however rapid may be his recovery. His appearance in court under such circumstances will be worth an extra thousand pounds. One of the things to live for will be to hear Stork's address to the jury."

There never was a warmer partisan than Roger Helston, nor one who took a greater delight in fighting.

There was fighting now, although at present of a desultory character, "all along the line," as regarded the "Great Moor Street Mystery," as it was called. Although Mr. Barlow, on the instant of receiving news from the detective of Matthew's discovery, had taken action, as we have seen, on his behalf, his innocence was by no means established

in other quarters. The conviction of it did not strike even Mr. Signet with the force that it struck Mr. Barlow; while Lady Pargiter, still without her diamonds, was quite as ready to believe Helston had taken them as ever. It was true that he had been found imprisoned, and under circumstances of some discomfort, but that might have arisen from a quarrel between him and his confederates over the spoil. Not one jot did she abate of her confident virulence against both him and his employer, which the latter met with defiance, indeed, but a little secret misgiving. For, even supposing Helston had no hand in abstracting the jewels, if they had been taken from him by force after they had been handed to him by Lady Pargiter, the jeweller would be equally responsible; if they were really proved to be in Paris, he felt that the mere absence of Matthew's receipt for them would not invalidate her ladyship's claim.

As for Mr. Brail, as became a man of his prudence and profession, he "kept his mind open" until the following circumstance dropped into it and filled up the aperture.

On the second night after the discovery of Matthew Helston a certain shambling figure might have been seen furtively making its way up Moor Street till it reached No. 11, and in fact *was* seen by one who recognised it, as with trembling fingers it was endeavouring to fit the latch-key into the door of the empty house. Mr. Brown, who was still on duty (in case of this very contingency, impossible though it might have seemed), arrested it.

"Don't'ee, don't'ee," it pleaded piteously; "I've only brought some bread and meat to eat upon the door step."

"Uncommon nice place for a picnic," observed Mr. Brown drily. "You opened the door, I suppose, for ventilation?"

Solomon himself would have found it difficult to reply to this question satisfactorily. Mr. Richard Dartmoor (for he it was) felt it to be unanswerable, and took refuge in physiological phenomena. "When a man has had 'the jumps' for a day or two he don't know rightly where he lives, but goes about trying doors."

"I see," said Mr. Brown, taking possession of the latch-key. "I shall have great pleasure in seeing you home."

And he took him to the police-station.

In saying that he had been suffering from "the jumps" (an unscientific term for *delirium tremens*) Mr. Dartmoor had for once told the truth; and, what was still more extraordinary, he had been caught in the commission of what was (comparatively speaking) a good action; though, in consequence of his late malady and the alarm consequent upon his apprehension, it was some days before he could explain matters.

On his failure to enlist John Rutherford in Captain Langton's designs for carrying off the Pargiter diamonds that gentleman had been compelled to turn his thoughts to some other scheme for accomplishing his purpose. And this was the ingenious device the Captain had hit upon.

No. 11 Moor Street was rather an ambitious residence for a gentleman who lived upon his wits to take on hand, but nevertheless he did so; though his delay in completing the preliminaries was so considerable that, as we have seen, it aroused the suspicions of Messrs. Carberry. He had no intention, however, of furnishing the mansion, which he only required for temporary purposes. Its attraction for him—though not a sentimental one—lay in its being next door to Lady Pargiter's. Not once, nor twice, but often, on his return in early winter mornings from "the Frobisher" or other of his favourite haunts, had he mistaken—not through drunkenness, for he never drank, but from fatigue, the darkness of the night, rain, snow, and other causes—his own modest-looking lodging-house for another of the same pattern. The circumstances might have happened to any man, and might happen, he justly reasoned, again. Only to make it happen in the particular case he had in his mind he took some extraordinary precautions. He furnished the hall of No. 11 exactly as the hall next door was furnished, of which he took care to make a personal observation. Besides Mr. Dartmoor, he had two other assistants in his pay, and these he caused to be attired in the selfsame livery—canary, trimmed with silver lace—worn by the servants of Lady Pargiter. In this world, unhappily, no plan can be devised that shall be totally independent of "happy chance" for its success; and more than once had all Captain Langton's preparations been made in vain. Twice had Matthew Helston driven away in his cab with the

diamonds according to expectation, but on each occasion one or other of Lady Pargiter's tall footmen had been standing at the door watching the weather, or in rapt admiration of the stars, until the cab had turned the corner of the street, and the Captain's opportunity was lost. But the third time Fate relented and even played into his hands.

The night, as we know, on which Matthew Helston disappeared was an exceptionally tempestuous one. The sky was starless, the wind was roaring, and the snow was falling heavily; a sort of night when in the country it is said "one cannot see one's hand," and when in town the flickering gas affords but untrustworthy guidance. No sooner had Matthew left the portico of No. 10 than the footman slammed the door behind him to keep out the sleet and snow. Then came the Captain's opportunity. John Rutherford had not driven twenty yards when the same footman (to all appearance) appeared at his side, having been sent, he said, by his mistress's orders to bring Mr. Helston back again—something had been forgotten, or at all events his presence was imperatively desired. Matthew was surprised, no doubt; but the cabman was only disgusted. With the wind and snow full in his face he drove back to the open door (as it seemed) he had just quitted; the lights and the liveries flashed on his dazzled eyes, and then the door closed upon his fare—who was lying gagged and bound behind it.

In a minute more the footman appeared with that message from his mistress with which we are acquainted, and which informed honest John that

his employer had accepted Lady Pargiter's hospitality for the night. He drove off, nothing loath to go straight home instead of to Paulet Street, and in the full conviction that he had left Matthew Helston at No. 10.

It was by no means Captain Langton's object to kill his prisoner; not that from any moral consideration he was one to "draw the line" at murder, but because he knew that the law, which is so marvellously indifferent to other crimes against the person (as compared with those against property), does draw the line there. Nay, notwithstanding what had been stated to Captain Langton's own disparagement in the way of nautical crime, the law does take some sort of cognisance of murder even at sea. About murder on land it is still more punctilious, and the Captain prudently refrained from irritating its susceptibilities by shedding blood. His intention was to keep his man in close confinement, in a place where nobody would think of looking for him, till the diamonds of which he had been robbed should be disposed of, and this last enterprise he took into his own hands.

Within half an hour after his victim was secured, the jewels were in the Captain's lodgings, and he had shown himself at "the Frobisher," where many of the company, no doubt, thought he had been the whole evening. It would not have been difficult, in short, had circumstances required it, for him to have established an *alibi*. Some people—and especially when it is an important matter—can only think of one thing at a time; but this was not the case with

the Captain. It was his habit whenever it could be accomplished (as at dumbby whist) to kill two birds with one stone, and he had another object in his eye even when it was fixed on the Pargiter diamonds. When Phoebe Mayson parted company with Major Lovell she fell low indeed, but never quite so low as, in her self-humiliation and abasement, she had described herself to have done to Mr. Barlow. After her chance meeting with Matthew Helston she had striven to live a virtuous life; a difficult task, indeed, for one who has fallen and is without the means of livelihood. It was during this period of well nigh hopeless struggle that she had resided in Bleak Street and had become acquainted with Langton. She made no secret of her past, nor of her good resolutions for the future, and he was certainly not the man to shake them. She had probably never entertained any feeling towards him warmer than indifference. That is the relation, however, in which many—and much more respectable—young persons find themselves with respect to their future husbands, and for her there was a great excuse; marriage in her case meant, or appeared to do so, salvation. Imagine what her life must have been as the debtor of that Bleak Street lodging-house keeper!

As to Langton he was a married man, though, to do him justice, had he been a bachelor he would have sacrificed himself at the altar all the same rather than have been baulked of his fancy. When he coveted anything he never put to himself the question, "Is it right?" (he would have considered

that to have been a metaphysical absurdity) but "Can I be punished for acquiring it, and how much?" To one who had just robbed and kidnapped a fellow-creature, bigamy seemed a venial offence—that is to say, it would entail no worse penalties than those he had already incurred. How he went through the form of marriage with the girl, and took her to Paris, and what came of it, we know. What happened on the night of the murder we do not know; but it is probable that, from the vehemence of her accusations, he made a shrewd guess at the old relation between her and Matthew, and, incensed in his turn, described Helston to her (to spite her) as being in even a worse plight than he imagined him to be. There was no evidence that Langton meant to starve his victim. Mr. Richard Dartmoor had had, indeed, instructions to provide him nightly with a sufficiency of food and to telegraph the state of matters in Moor Street to his employer every morning. Only, having given way to the seductions of liquor, "the jumps" had seized him and caused an intermittence in his visits to No. 11 that had been well-nigh fatal.

CHAPTER XXVI.

GATHERED THREADS.

It was on New Year's Day that Matthew Helston recovered speech and gladdened Sabey's heart with his first feeble utterance more than any bird in springtime gladdens his fond mate with a full tide of song. He had recognised her long before, but had been content to lie with his wasted hand in hers and his eyes fixed upon the loving face that could never gaze enough upon him.

"Baby — Amy — Uncle Stephen — Frank" — she had now mentioned every name that was dear to him by turn, and she had assured him all were well. Then he murmured something which even her quick ear could not catch; but it sounded like "Butterfly — Nut." This gave her a pang of terror, since it surely showed that his mind was still astray. Since he repeated it, however, with fretful persistence, she sent for Amy.

"It must be something mechanical," was her verdict. "A nut is the head of a screw. Has it anything to do with Madge, Matthew?" she whispered softly.

To see the light leap up in his weary eyes was like beholding a resurrection. There was no doubt of its having to do with Madge. So, with the doctor's permission, she was brought upstairs and placed by the bedside of the patient. When he saw how bright

and clean she was, he looked up in his wife's face with a grateful smile that would have repaid a lifetime of oil-and-feather work.

"Of course I looked after Madge," she murmured simply, "when her master was away."

Having contrived to express to the two women that if the nut on a certain screw were shaped like a butterfly, motion would be imparted to the machine, Matthew insisted upon Uncle Stephen being sent for to hear the news of that great discovery.

"I am so happy, dear uncle," he said.

"You deserve to be so, my good boy," answered the old man with emotion, "if, at least, there is any truth in the theory of compensation."

Matthew shook his head.

"It is not the compensation-balance at all," he said; "the nut itself forms the fly."

"I see," said Uncle Stephen, though he didn't.

"It was the one thing (though sometimes the cellar was too full of flying Madges) that kept me up in my prison," murmured Matthew. "Whenever I thought of Sabey and the little one I sank grave-wards."

Then they understood how that, in the silence and solitude of his prison, he had thought out the problem of imparting motion to Madge, and thereby banished the despairing thoughts and longings which would otherwise have destroyed him.

"To be once more with you all is Heaven itself," he whispered; "but next to that——" And again he murmured the name of his invention. "Oh, I am so happy, and so well content!"

Uncle Stephen's face bore the old grave and pitying smile that so well became it.

"You think so, my boy, but you will never be content till you have found out three things—the square of the circle, the key of the Pyramid of Cheops, and the value of the No. 7."

"There is something in that," admitted Matthew, with an answering smile. Then he asked for Frank; and there was silence.

"He is not ill?" he continued with anxiety. "You told me he was well; where is Frank, Amy?"

Sabey answered for her. "He returns from Paris to-day, and will be here this evening."

It would have been no use for Amy to have said "No" when Matthew had asked for him. If he had asked for Mr. Signet or for Lady Pargiter, Sabey would have said, "They shall be here," and got them somehow.

When Mr. Barlow did come Sabey had the first hug of him in the parlour—for had he not saved her husband's life?—and Amy the second.

"Can you ever forgive me, Frank?" she sobbed.

"It is I who need forgiveness," he said simply.

"And I," put in Uncle Stephen so meekly and so softly that Sabey did not hear him.

Amy cast such a look of earnest entreaty at him that his appeal was not repeated. He had satisfied his conscience by thus acknowledging his want of faith in Sabey's presence and before witnesses; and, since she had taken no notice of it, so much the better. He had neither the will nor the courage to make confession a second time. Sabey never knew

that either Uncle Stephen or Mr. Barlow had ever lacked faith for a moment in Matthew's innocence; which, I am inclined to think, was fortunate. Once, in alluding to their past miseries, she admitted to Uncle Stephen that the recollection of them would remain with her for ever. "There are some things," she said, "which one can never forget."

"Things are so different with me," returned the old gentleman in his dry way: "*I* forget everything."

But, notwithstanding his lightness of speech, he had never congratulated himself more sincerely upon his reticence in a certain matter than on that occasion.

Matthew, on the other hand, was told "all about it"; and he at once allowed that, with the facts they had before them, no men could have come to any other conclusion than that which had been so unwillingly arrived at by Mr. Durham and Mr. Barlow.

"Yet Sabey and Amy both believed in you, Matt," said Uncle Stephen remorsefully.

"That's because they are women and without logical minds," explained Matthew cheerfully. "But we don't love them less upon that account, mind you."

If Matthew Helston had been slow to put lance in rest in defence of the fair sex he would have been ingrate and recreant indeed. It is probable that, since Mahomet's time, no two women had ever shown more faith in one man than Sabey and Amy had done in his case; for though they were unaware

until afterwards of that little episode which seemed to connect his absence with Phœbe Mayson, it is my opinion, if they had known it, it would not have made one pennyworth of difference in their view of matters. Facts may be stubborn things, but a woman's trust with love to back it is like iron with teak behind it.

It was not without some difficulty that Mr. Barlow got away from Paris to eat his New Year's dinner in Cavendish Grove, since of course the police had need of him in connection with the murder of poor Phœbe. He had doubted in his own mind as to whether he should tell Major Lovell who it was that he had seen lying dead that Christmas morning in the foreign city which had not held for her one single friend; or whose hand had done the deed; nor was it certainly with any view of arousing his remorse or marring his butterfly pleasures that he did so; but, in his ignorance of the laws and customs of the country in which he found himself, he feared that there should be some miscarriage of justice in the matter, and therefore appealed to the Major for advice. The manner in which that gentleman received his views astonished him not a little. He had anticipated a gentlemanly expression of regret at most; he had struck a match merely to light, as it were, an ornamental *bougie*—and found he had fired a powder magazine!

“Phœbe—murdered—and by that damnable scoundrel!”

His languid manners were thrown off with his velvet coat at once; and, what surprised Mr. Barlow

more than all, he insisted on going to see the murdered woman.

He came back greatly agitated, and for the time (the effect lasted a week, perhaps) quite a different man. "It was I who killed her, Mr. Barlow," he exclaimed with bitter self-reproach, "though that villain struck the blow." His passion against the criminal was terrible to witness. "If the law fails in its duty, as I am a living man I will not fail in mine." And, indeed, if Captain Langton had slipped through the fingers of Justice he would without doubt have found himself in those of another avenger. "If money is wanted, Mr. Barlow," added the Major simply, "there's two hundred pounds, which, thank Heaven, I won at the *cercle* last night."

However, as it happened, though he saved his head—*parce que le pauvre homme était jaloux*, it seemed—the Captain went to the galleys for life.

The diamonds were found in his possession, and, what was very curious, and showed the extreme audacity of the man, the very case itself; indeed, he had only taken three of the jewels out of their setting. The 500*l.* reward for their recovery Mr. Signet paid without a murmur; but the similar sum offered by Lady Pargiter for Matthew's apprehension was, as Mr. Brail described it, rather a tooth-drawer for that lady. He had only discovered for her, you see, a prosecutor in an action for libel.

The jewels, however, were, of course, handed over to her. Matthew acknowledged that he had received them from her and had given her a receipt; the reason of her non-production of which was

peculiar. On the night of his disappearance Lady Pargiter, on her return from the ball, had found a note awaiting her from a high official personage which had given her great dissatisfaction. It had been her desire to be invited to a certain entertainment given by Royalty itself, and for which she had intrigued and laboured with even more than her usual pertinacity. And the official personage had replied finally, though in the politest terms, in the negative. No wonder Matthew congratulated himself that night (little knowing to what he was doomed) that it was the last time he would stand in her ladyship's presence and listen to her harsh and insulting tones. After his departure, and a few minutes passed in snarling at her maid, she had in a gust of passion—or perhaps for fear her humiliation should become known—snatched up the official note from the dressing-table and flung it into the fire. Only, instead of the note, she burnt the receipt for the diamonds which lay by its side. She discovered her mistake in an instant, and despatched Patty Selwood to bid the footman run after the cab. If he had been five minutes earlier he would have seen it coming back—with a facsimile of his canary-coloured self running by his side—to deposit its occupant at No. 11. As it was he only saw an empty street. The absence of the receipt, though it made her ladyship "fidgety," seemed of small consequence at the moment; but the next morning, when the disappearance of Matthew became known, it of course assumed immense importance. Thereupon ensued the course of duplicity upon Lady Pargiter's

part with which we are acquainted, and which justly exposed her to such grave suspicions; and, on the other hand, her partial betrayal by Patty Selwood, whom cunning and hate combined had taught exactly how much to say.

Nor did Lady Pargiter's punishment end here. After Mr. Brail had got his money he thought it his duty to acquaint her with the fact that her family diamonds had been pronounced by the French experts to be made of paste (and, indeed, it was for attempting to dispose of them as real ones that Captain Langton had got into trouble). Her incredulity, of course, was extreme, and was expressed with characteristic vehemence; but the fact was as the detective had stated.

"For one table and *the picture in it*," observed Uncle Stephen, in reference to the comparative value of the morocco case, "King Attalus gave Aristocles the Theban a hundred talents in silver."

When convinced of her misfortune her ladyship accused Mr. Signet of having substituted paste for her diamonds; but I am glad to say that that gentleman's innocence of any such fraud was fully established. The Pargiter *parure* had been composed of genuine stones at one time, when Mr. Ingot, her ladyship's father, had endeavoured to dispose of them to the jeweller; and of course Mr. Signet had taken for granted that they were the same he had already valued and approved, though he had refused to give Mr. Ingot's price for them. That worthy money-lender had disposed of them, however, before his death, and caused the counterfeits to be made.

He concluded that their genuineness would never be questioned; that they would remain an heirloom in his family for ever; and if (as actually happened) some jeweller, as indeed he had recommended, should be made responsible for them, and they should be stolen while in his possession, what a good stroke of business it would be for his daughter and heiress to receive 25,000*l.* of compensation for the loss of what was in reality worth about a hundred pounds! Unhappily, things turned out somewhat contrary to this astute gentleman's expectations.

Could aught have touched him there below,
If aught of things that here befall
Could move him where he was at all,

I don't think the well-meaning old gentleman would have been pleased to hear what his daughter said of him when these circumstances came to light.

Let us have done with her, and rise from our tale with a sweeter taste in our mouth than that of harshness, pride, and greed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONCLUSION.

THOUGH Lady Pargiter was herself merciless, she was the cause of mercy in others (which, perhaps, may be the reason, otherwise inexplicable, why such people are permitted to exist). Taking into account what she had suffered, and how the sparkling pride of her life had, as in a fairy tale, been changed into a handful of worthless pebbles, Matthew Helston withdrew from the prosecution of her ladyship for malicious libel. So strongly, however, was Uncle Roger for going on with it that it would, perhaps, have been proceeded with but for Sabey's opposition.

"Pray, pray let us have peace," she said; "God has been so good to us; let us not persecute any creature He has made."

"Prosecute, prosecute," suggested Mr. Barlow, in gentle defence of the methods of legal procedure; but Sabey had made no mistake in what she meant to say, and carried her point.

There was nothing now, indeed, which, having once resolved upon, she failed to carry. She was the captain of the ship and Amy the most efficient of first lieutenants. Matthew, as we know, had never aspired to domestic rule; and Uncle Stephen and Mr. Barlow had become her slaves. They felt that they could never make her reparation enough for a

certain offence of the commission of which she remained ignorant to her dying day.

Uncle Roger, disenchanted of Cousin Dick, and earnestly desirous of a reconciliation with his only nephew, perceived that the shortest and surest way to it was through the good offices of his wife, and thus completed the sum of her subjects. He had counted on getting Matthew back to Latbury as his partner, and flattered himself, indeed, that he would have "jumped at the offer." He declined it, or rather Sabey declined it for him, with the most gracious thanks. "My husband is a man of genius," she said, "but it does not lie in the legal direction. He is the inventor of the Butterfly Nut."

"Confound that Madge," muttered Uncle Roger (we may be sure inaudibly), and complained most bitterly of his disappointment to Mr. Durham. "It would serve Matthew right," he said, "if I left all my money to a hospital."

"Very likely, my dear sir," replied Uncle Stephen; "only nobody *is* served right in this world."

"But what if I mean to do it, sir?" returned the old gentleman irascibly.

"Then it's quite certain not to happen," was the quiet reply. "Nothing does happen—it is not *my* remark—except the Unexpected. I used to think Matthew the most unlucky man in the world. He reminded one of Thomas Tusser, who spread his bread with all sorts of butter, and none of it would stick; yet see what a fortune he is making out of Madge after all."

"But he was all wrong about her; he can't make her move an inch."

"Of course not. If he did that my theory would be established beyond all question. But though the Butterfly Nut failed there, the principle of the flying screw has been established by it. He could have ten thousand pounds for the patent to-morrow. Look at the Pargiter diamonds—paste! Look at John Rutherford, supposed to have lied more than Charles the Ninth or the Duke of Gloucester, yet who stated the facts as he believed them."

"A nasty, poaching vagabond," urged Uncle Roger, "who, Mr. Brail says, had meant to kill Matthew with a pistol, on his own account."

"That is another mistake, my dear sir. He bought the pistol to defend himself against the designs of Dartmoor. We have heard all about it from the man's own lips."

"Then why didn't he tell us about Dartmoor's designs?"

"Well, that again is curious. Rutherford is a man of his word (another example of the unexpected in a cabman, by the way), and had promised not to betray them; and as he was quite certain in his own mind (and therefore wrong, of course) that he had left Matthew at Lady Pargiter's, and that consequently Dartmoor could have had no hand in his disappearance, he held his tongue. Then again can anything—between ourselves—have been more unexpected than the conduct of our friend Mr. Barlow? I confess I used to think but very little of him."

"A devilish sharp young fellow," put in Uncle Roger.

Uncle Stephen shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly; sharp but narrow, like a needle—no head, as I thought. Well, see how nobly he has come out of all this. But for him our Matthew would have been lost to us."

"True," answered Uncle Roger; "I am indebted to him for that."

"Notwithstanding the hospital," put in the other silyly.

"Bother the hospital, sir. I shall give Barlow my London business."

It was really astonishing how that visit to Paris had developed Mr. Barlow's character. Of course it was not the mere going abroad—for there is no evidence that Mr. Cook's excursionists are intellectually any the better for that—but the experience of life that had been opened up to him. It had evoked all sorts of qualities and feelings at the existence of which in him only one person in the world had guessed. In short, at bottom he was worthy of her.

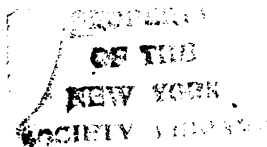
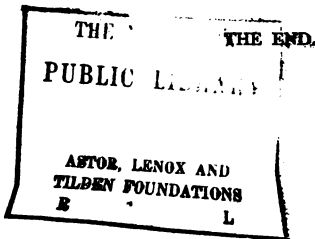
Before Amy married him he had become as a brother of his blood to Matthew; for had he not seen poor Phœbe at the very last and done his best to avenge her? Sabey, of course, knew all about it and sympathised with him as only a good woman can with a rival—who is dead. Matthew did not talk much of his unhappy first love; but he thought about her a good deal—always tenderly, purely, and with gratitude. It was curious, and went to confirm

Uncle Stephen's theory, that the nature of this man, so reticent and unsocial, should have been so thoroughly known and appreciated by three women; two of whom may be said to have lived for him, and one to have died for him.

It may be taken for granted that when a man is beloved—in honest fashion—by more than one woman, he is deserving of love.

As to Uncle Stephen and Uncle Roger I don't know which idolised their nephew most; and in one case at least it was quite independent of his success in the world. The success, however, had, I think, some influence upon his own character; it unconsciously expanded under it in a genial and wholesome way, like a flower that, after a long winter, feels the kiss of the sun. He had no more disappointments, and only one regret. Yet, after all, was it not better even for poor Phoebe herself that she was dead?

In the same desk in which had been discovered that memorandum of his tender forethought for her, there was now a scrap of paper, torn and bloodstained, on which were scrawled the words that had saved Matthew's life; and on them—it is no dishonour to his manhood to confess it—he never looked without a tear.



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